THE RAIN IN TAIPEI

A novel

STEVEN FRATTALI

NEW PRESS OF BOSTON

© 2024 by STEVEN FRATTALI
All rights reserved

THE RAIN IN TAIPEI

CHAPTER 1

Night was falling quickly, the way that it always did. It would be afternoon, and then, after a mere suggestion of twilight, it would suddenly be dark. I had just stepped off the city bus which left me near a row of small shops. There was no sidewalk, just the road's shoulder, encumbered, like some sort of obstacle course, with large metal signs set in steel frames, as tall as a man and resembling giant playing cards. The bus drove off amid a cone of diesel fumes. Stray dogs dodged here and there in heavy traffic, and the dim light gave the road a purplish look. Cars had their headlights on. A pink plastic bag was kited about by the wind. There were small stones and dusty grit along the road's edge. The typhoon season would be coming.

I walked past a juice drink concession – Witchery Ider it was called – a Buddhist shop, a Chinese medicine place with a large diagram of a foot sole in the window, and then turned right into an alleyway just wide enough for two cars to pass, which then branched off like a Y. Up the branched-off way, which was more narrow, the street was of red brick that had been covered with macadam, but the brick showed through like patchwork. The buildings on either side were of gray stone blocks, roughly cut and cemented, and around a slight bend was the little eating place that sat at an angle to the road. It had neither doors nor windows, just an open wall on one side and an open wall on the other. Several people could pass abreast through each. Inside, the floor was dusty concrete. There was a warm feeling to the light from the overhead fixtures. There was a group of wooden tables in the

room's middle. Along one side was a counter where you ordered and next to that a long stretch of metal countertop with rows of pots, steamers, fire-blackened woks and, opposite, along the back wall, a grill. It was all run by a woman who looked to be in her fifties, but one noticed her still-beautiful figure inside a soft gray house dress. She made up one order after another, moving quickly about. When she saw me, she gave me a big smile – she had one gold tooth – and waved with one hand as though scrubbing something off a window.

"Ni hao, Ni hao."

"Ni hao," I said smiling, and nodded.

I was always happy to see her, and I was struck by how youthful she still was despite all the hard work she had to do. That night it was busy but not crowded. There were several men eating by themselves – engineers from the nearby science park maybe, judging from their dress slacks, neat shirts, and pagers in their belts. And there was a steady stream of people coming and going, picking up take-out orders. She took care of this by herself, pausing from her cooking just long enough to ring them up and give change. There was a young woman of perhaps twenty-five with a foreign guy – tall, slim, somewhat stooped, with a pale complexion and short black hair. She seemed to be showing him around, and this was one of the local attractions she wanted him to see. He was shy and awkward. I couldn't help wondering if I had looked as out of place as that when I had first arrived, just about a year before.

And it was just around that time, and in just this place, that I had first met Miss D. I recalled how she had been looking at me in her intent curious way, as I came up the road, stepped through the open wall, and took a seat. I had little Chinese then and so, amused, but very kindly in her soft gentle way, she had helped me to order. I was struck by how ready she had been to engage this odd foreign man and then had even agreed to become my Chinese tutor. It turned out that she taught English at a local commercial English school. (There were many of these). And so that was how our

somewhat odd relationship began. I couldn't help but think of her as I sat there over my bowl of soup noodles. How surprised she was, and impressed I suppose, when she saw the overly large apartment where I was living then, and where I still lived, on the 12th floor of a nearby high rise. In fact, as it happened, I had to meet her there later that very evening for one of our weekly lessons.

"So are you going to move really?" she asked and gave a little nod with her forehead. As though to say *'you know? really?'* Then she stepped back to busy herself with something in my kitchen. I was sitting at the desk I had set up in front of the large picture window that took up one whole wall of the living room. Beyond you could see, in the darkness, one edge of the island's central mountain chain, dim in outline yet mysterious, the way that all mountains are.

"I think they will like this new tea I got," she said, coming back out. She was short and slight – she came up to about my shoulder – with a bowl-like hair style that framed her round features. She was wearing an ochre-colored smock, with loose fitting pajama pants of the same color, and black shoes. She stood there holding up the tea in its shiny gold package.

"Ok," I said. She knew that I didn't know anything about tea.

"It's from Chia Yi – very special," she said, holding it up beside her face, smiling, as though she were advertising the brand.

"You bought it?"

"Yes."

"Was it expensive?"

"No, I get a special deal. *Laubahn* is my father's friend."

"I see."

"You know?" she said. "I think they will. Also, this *feng li su* I got." She walked quickly back into the kitchen, her shoes clicking lightly on the tile floor. Then she came back with the package of little pineapple cakes for my approval. I smiled and nodded.

"Well it's a class, you know."

“Still have to have some nice things – right?” Then she disappeared back into the kitchen and came back out with a small brown teapot.

“Here – I made some tea for you.” And she set down the pot along with a small blue and white teacup on the desk.

“Thank you.”

“Do you think it’s ok to have class in your apartment?” she said, tilting her face a little to the side as she sat down in the chair beside the desk.

“It’s ok. It’s a special class,” I said. She nodded in comprehension if not approval.

“Will you be coming again?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, chopping down with her chin to emphasize. Then she glanced sideways slyly, as though spying in an opposite corner of the room some unsuspected ambition. “I enjoy doing translations. Some of my favorite poems. *Seven Miles of Fragrance*, a famous book here in Taiwan.”

“Well –” she gave a little pat with all ten fingers down onto the desk. “I better go now. You did very well, as usual,” she said with mock seriousness, and made the little downward chop of her chin once more. We both smiled and I walked her to the door where she slipped out with a slight bow, as she always did.

So then I was alone in the empty silent apartment – four bedrooms no less – that I had been forced to take, owing to the lack of availability of anything more suitable. *Loneliness destroys the soul,* I read once somewhere. In a way, I had come to Taiwan to escape the United States. And yet images haunted my thoughts. And then it was by chance – but they say that nothing ever happens by chance – that I was able to get the position that I now had at a university outside of Taipei, and I took this as an opportunity to leave the US and go to the other side of the world.

I went into the bedroom to get my bottle of pills – one of several – and then to the refrigerator for one of my bottles of wine – there were several of these as well. Miss D occasionally made little comments about it, but I ignored them and of course she didn’t press the issue. Loneliness destroys

the soul. No matter how afflicted the soul might be, it is yet still capable of loneliness. After a bit, I went back to my desk and opened the computer, going to a website I had been aware of for a while. There I had made the acquaintance of a woman right in Taipei who went by the name of Burning Jade. She was obviously extremely intelligent – she seemed to have perfect written English, not only perfect but even eloquent when she was on one of her favorite subjects – literature, art, theatre, film – and witty, when she was on the subject of internet dating. She was also very wary – unwilling to disclose much about herself, and not willing to share any photos except for one – a remote snapshot taken from some distance and in profile: she appeared to be walking along a beach, kicking up the sand – her gaze focused down as though in thought. It was a grainy image and out of focus. I could tell little from it. I wrote a note to her, wondering if she would reply, but she never did. That night, for a little while longer, my vague and almost dreaming gaze was occupied by the other postage-stamp-size faces. It was like a catalogue – a catalogue of faces, of minds, of souls. Each one, behind fixed expressions, and the hard artificial light, held hundreds of stories, and each story hundreds of others, branching on and on. What would you find in such a catalogue? Who could say? But after a while, the combination of pills and wine began to have its predictable effect, and I made my way to my bed and a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 2

The next morning, I caught one of the rickety, orange-painted city buses at a nearby street corner, and in about 45 minutes, after a long circuitous route, was left at the campus. I sometimes liked to get there early. I enjoyed sitting in my office in the almost silent building. I spent some time catching up on paperwork, or just sitting there, thinking. I was

aware of people – the cleaning staff, eventually students and faculty – moving about in the rest of the building. After a while, slanted spotlights of sun came through apertures in the sepia blinds. The day would be very hot. I went to the window and raised the blinds and looked out over the roofs of the city which were beginning to shine in the subtropical sunlight. Then there was a knock at the door, and my assistant Eileen edged her face and one shoulder through, smiled, and came in. Almost apologetically she placed a dense wad of paper forms – a grant application – at the edge of the green metal desk and slid them toward me. “These also have to be filled out,” she said. “I looked through them. I filled in some of the information already.”

“Ok, thank you.”

“Have you seen professor Kate yet?”

“No. Why?”

“She was down in the department office looking for you.”

“This morning?”

“No. I guess at different times.”

I wondered what it could be about but said nothing. She was a colleague, another American in fact – there were three of us – who had been at the place for ten or fifteen years and who, among other things, encouraged students to call her by her first name – hence the “Professor Kate.”

“Do you need anything else?” she asked. She was a tall slender girl. Her brown complexion always reminded me of a ripe bosc pear, and perhaps as well the slight rondure to her face. “No,” I said and smiled.

“Ok, she said. “Then I’ll be around. You can call down to the office if you need me. I’ll be there until noon.”

“Ok.”

She smiled and seemed to bow a little with her forehead and titled her shoulders into it, a gesture of amusement, friendliness, respect – more or less in that order – and then left. It was getting to be time for one of my

classes, so I gathered up my things and left. After class, I found several students waiting for me at the door. This was not unusual. I said hello and let them in. Today it was a mixture of graduates and undergraduates. There was Lillian Wu and Jean Wang, two graduate students: Lillian from our department of foreign languages, Jean in fact from biology, but she was always wanting to improve her already essentially perfect English. Then there was Kate Ho – Professor Kate, who was popular with a certain set, had started a fashion for the name Kate, and several girls who originally had other English names had switched over. She was a quiet watchful girl, very fair, with a helmet of onyx hair to her shoulders. She was from, people said, a wealthy Cantonese family. There was Francis Li, tall, always a bit stooped, with a sallow complexion, long hair and a long oval face. She always reminded me of one of Modigliani's Madonna-like women. There was Emily Liang, with her plump moonlike face, and with her Evangeline Lin, with her beautiful wide mouth and gleaming smile. After a while there were several others and various people came and went, some just briefly, others stayed for a while. There were requests to enter already full courses, proposals for MA theses to look over, and always letters of reference to be written for applications for graduate school, either in Taiwan or in the US. I was always being asked for something. After various chores were completed, and most had left, there were a few who stayed on, sitting at the round table that occupied the center of the room. This was a special group of graduate students who had expressed interest in translating poetry, so they worked on rendering English language poets into Chinese – Emily Dickinson was a favorite – or Chinese poets into English. They formed a special group, not really a class, which met once a week in my office and more recently at my apartment. Currently we were doing the well-known Taiwanese poet Hsi Mu Ren.

"She's too elegant" Jean said, smiling, half joking. There was a glimmer of amusement in the group. "Are we meeting at your apartment again?" Lillian sked.

“Yes, I thought it would be convenient.” They all smiled and nodded. Vincent Lee had just come in with his friend Mike Yang. Seven or eight now sat around the table and on the black leather couch that ran along one wall. We took apart phrases, examined them, tried out alternatives. Single words were held up for examination like a gemstone held to the light. There was agreement, disagreement, laughter. Then there was a knock at the door. Professor Kate popped her head just past it – her pretty face and the streams of white-blond hair. “Oh,” she said. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.” And she was gone before I could say anything. But by then, in any case, we were a bit tired, and they were all ready to leave. Then after taking leaves and planning for the next session, I was alone again.

It was a stretch of the afternoon that always had an effect on me – I felt exposed, as though to a nameless threat, alone in the world, and without a real place where I belonged. And that is what I really was in fact. “You are in flight from the United States” one of my students observed in the middle of a seminar. And the others were embarrassed at the truth. Though I had fled one country, I had not found another. Instead, I had found a peculiar, suspended existence, as though one were hanging in empty space.

Then there was another knock at the door which opened immediately. It was Lu, my older colleague who had been functioning as a sort of mentor and from whom I rented my apartment. He was standing in the middle of the room, an expression of mock annoyance on his face. The problem was that I had arranged to have the scheduling of one of my courses changed.

“Yoo-ooo can naht *do*,” he said. “is against rules.”

“All right, well I’m sorry.”

“Yaah…. Ok well, since you change it now, we just let it stay. But from now on, you have to, you know, go through the committee.”

I nodded agreement.

“Here everything by committee,” he said and smiled to show he was himself amused by it all. He was from Hong Kong originally, a bit of a

foreigner himself, and I had gathered he was not allowed to forget this, even by the other faculty members. “Yaah everything here by committee. So…anyhow, how are you getting along? You have good summer? You go back home at all?”

“No, I just stayed here. Worked. Sit down.”

“Oh ok.”

“I would have had a problem with money anyway,” I ventured to say. “I have not gotten the raise, and they still owe me money. Sit down.”

“Thank you. Owe you?”

“Yes you know, they didn’t pay me for the first three months I was here.”

“Oh right,” he said recalling. It did seem that he had forgotten. “Yaah I remember now. I doan know why they do like that, you know?”

“Yes well that’s what they did, and they said I would get that back.”

“Some kind of bookkeeping thing, I doan know.”

“But I still haven’t.”

“Yaah ok it seems strange to me, you know. I will look into for you. Almost like they try to drive you away. I don’t remember Kate or Gretchen have anything like this. Or Simon. He’s from Australia of course. Obviously they are American too. Those two, you see them yet?”

“No.”

“Yeah ok. I look into this for you. You let me know you hear anything.”

“Ok thank you.”

“Yaah sure. We want you to be happy here,” he grinned.” Ok well, I see you around then,” he said. Then he rose and gave me a pat on the shoulder the way he always tended to do and then let himself out. I had not wanted to mention the more serious issue that we had discussed some time before, though it was in the air between us, perhaps just slightly, though with Lu it was hard to tell: anything having to do with another person tended to fade from his mind, unless it could be securely linked to what would be good for him. This particular issue didn’t fall into that category,

but it was sufficiently serious in itself, and its implications were as well, and so I – and perhaps the two of us – had let it remain undisturbed.

CHAPTER 3

I took the bus into Taipei the next morning very early because I had a medical appointment at Tai Da Yuen, the large hospital attached to the national university. On the bus I watched the beautiful landscape skim by – rice fields, groves of trees, peanut fields, fields of beans, yams, carrots, peas…small thickets of fruit trees, stone farm houses with swooping tile roofs, their ends like swallow tails; a door in a stone wall painted red – always red, the color of good fortune; occasionally a Buddhist shrine not far from the roadside, seeming to have been set down by magic, no other structures nearby, no evidence of visitors; as the day got brighter the troughs of water in the rice fields shined like streams of silver; the green of the rice plants were like straight rows of jade. Trucks passed us carrying stacked-up cages with pigs and chickens being taken to the markets in Taipei, the pigs seeming to have some dim sense of what awaited them, their ears flapping in the wind. After a while we were at the city's edge, and

we passed a famous Buddhist temple – a structure furiously ornate, fold upon fold, a crimson fire of stone, a lava flow charmed to stillness by the gods themselves. Past that there was the Taipei School for the Deaf, and shortly after that we were at the main bus depot.

Morning in the city – and I thought once again, How I love you, Taipei! As I took the bridge over that led from the bus depot to the Main Station of the Metro. There were always some beggars on the concourse going over – a monk sitting composed on his mat, a beggar wearing only blue gym shorts sprawled on the bare concrete, one stump of an arm squeezed off above the elbow, the other hand holding a metal cup, a splash of coins inside. And then there was the smooth glossy tile floor of the Main Station, a wedge of morning light falling through the huge space, and I showed my card and went through the turnstile. In the subway I often studied the faces that I knew were studying me, though they politely avoided showing it. There were not many foreigners around. One always stood out. Most expressions that met yours were friendly, at times looking to see if you needed some kind of assistance. It made me wonder the more at some of the things I had encountered at the university, among the intelligentsia.

But on that morning, in the subway, I had another one of my episodes. The first time it happened I was sitting there across from a row of other riders, some seated, some standing, a typical busy afternoon, and the car was crowded. And for whatever reason I was studying people’s ankles. I was struck by the beauty of these rows of ankles, some male, some female, some younger, some older. I wasn’t paying attention to whom the ankles belonged to, but studied the very physical structure itself, one example after another, a long row of ankles, looking at them as a painter might, studying the anatomy. And I was struck, as a painter must be, by the intricacy and beauty of this physical structure. I thought of what it is for such a thing to be burned to a black stump by things like napalm, and once again the famous photograph that had haunted me for years came to mind, and it was as if I saw right there the naked young girl running screaming down the dirt

road, her whole body seeming to shriek up into the sky, her arms reaching out, her village hidden behind a huge fireball and streams of black smoke….But it was still too early to have a drink, and I had to get to my appointment.

I walked into the crowded halls of Tai Da Yuen, a large brick building near the university campus. Crowds of people were pushing their way through. Over to one side, framed in the morning sun, a van driver and two attendants in white were helping an older woman in a yellow dress into a wheel chair; there were clumps of nurses in fours and fives crossing the lobby, one in particular talking loudly to her group, gesturing, her hand beating the air; there were the information providers in raised kiosks – nearby one, an old man in a wheel chair, a green tank strapped to its side, a clear thin tube from it into his nose – he was in pajamas, his head weak and shaky on his thin neck, a young woman, probably his daughter, and her young husband were looking after him, the husband asking for information. Tai Da is very confusing at first. But I had been here before and I knew where to go. I made my way to *jingshenbing xue*, psychiatry.

I would be seeing Dr. Yang, who did his training at Stanford. He always liked to mention this in conversation, but there was no doubt that he was an expert in his field. There were chairs set along the walls of the waiting area – the middle of the room occupied by a large green carpet, the piles of which seemed to catch the bright light here and there as it came through the low rectangular windows. But the doctor did not really have an office. Instead, he sat at a small table behind a pull curtain like the one around a hospital bed, his nurse at another small table beside him. When your name was called the curtain opened and you took your seat near him on a metal stool and the curtain was pulled shut around the three of you.

I sat there looking at Dr. Yang and his pretty, slightly plump nurse, the curtain the color of a parachute tent-like above us. His nurse smiled and squinted her eyes by way of greeting. Dr. Yang was short and slim with a rounded face, a sly inquiring grin, and a strange resemblance to Albert

Camus. He smiled when he saw that it was me who had just sat down. He briefly consulted his computer. Then he turned to me.

"So…how have you been?"

"Not bad."

"Sleep – how is your sleep?"

"It's sometimes better."

"And sometimes not." He finishes my sentence. We know each other well by this point. "Any dinking?" he asks, deliberately sudden to catch me off guard, but in a friendly tone.

"No," I said, lying.

He looked back at his computer screen. "So you are taking…" and here he went through the list of antidepressants, tranquilizers, and sedatives I'd been prescribed.

"Yes," I said.

"Ok," he seemed to be considering, adjusting the medication. "Let me listen," he said and listened to my heart and my breathing, his touch was gentle and encouraging. I always thought he was a wonderful guy, brilliant but modest, seeming to know what I was feeling better than I myself did.

"Any more of those flashbacks?"

"Yes," I said. "Just now in fact."

"Really?"

"Yes. On the subway."

"What did you do?

"I just waited for it to pass."

"Any…urge to drink?"

"Yes, but I didn't do it."

"Good," he said smiling, giving a little shake to his chin. "Good," he confirmed. "Maybe you are…" He put the stethoscope away in its little silver box. "Maybe you are two men," he said. "One is an American man, and one is Taiwanese" he smiled. It was his way of welcoming me. "Yes," I said. "I'm trying." And we both laughed. His nurse smiled. She did not know that

much English. Dr. Yang's was perfect. He gave me a firm handshake as he always did, and I got up from the metal swivel stool. He had already sent the medication order to the pharmacy.

After I collected my pills, I went out to walk around the city and after a bit of wandering I found a small park. It was three stone benches in a horseshoe pattern forming a semi-circular courtyard paved with field stone broken in jagged pieces, cemented in a kind of mosaic. But it was beautiful anyway, a kind of modest beauty – plain, simple, roughly hewn…. The afternoon light was stark against the concrete wall of the apartment house across the street; parked motorcycles crowded the sidewalk there, all leaning the same way, like toppled dominoes. Traffic noise was not far off. Bright clover shapes slid across the stones – leaf shadows were like tiny masks laughing and shaking. The tree branch above me cast its dark crooked shape, a water serpent asleep in a pool of light. Autumn winds were beginning to come; a typhoon had been predicted but it had drifted off toward the ocean. The stones were like chunks of rubble, dusty with the city's grime, crude hacked pieces of a jig saw, veined with granular rivers of cement. They were like a map of some unknown region, ancient and forbidding. The light shapes danced and tossed as the wind gusted through. Beautiful city, I couldn't help but think, what will become of you?

Later that night in my otherwise dark apartment I was looking into my own computer screen. She had reappeared on the site after some time away, and for several nights we chatted much more than we ever had before. It was a sudden change in our relationship, if that could be the word, and I had to wonder what had prompted it on her side. She seemed anxious to glean information about me, an intention that she tried to conceal but which showed through here and there. At one point she even asked me to write her some pornography. "Tell me what you would do to me," she wrote. Perhaps unwisely, I obliged.

"Ok," she responded, "you made me get wet."

"Really?"

"Yes. Very good."

"Ok. I'm glad you liked it." And to myself, in my silent thought, staring into the lighted screen, I had to wonder if she was really as crass as that. Or was it a kind of act?

"I'm a screamer," she informed me. And then:

"I love film!!" she exclaimed at another point. And then –

"I love theatre! I love all art – all all all!!"

"What's your favorite?" I asked.

"No favorite – all. Love everything. Life has many aspects, so there must be many arts. Including mine."

"Which is that?"

"Never mind."

"Ok."

"Including Taiwan arts, our traditions. Taiwan opera, very beautiful – complex – so
amazing. Taiwan native music. So…haunt…"

"Haunting?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"We are making our own place here, our own culture. Our own modern democratic place, a place of freedom and beauty, with no help from anyone. China always opposing."

"No help?"

"No."

"What about the US?"

"No, just military money, which disappears into the bank accounts of the corrupt generals."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Culture of bribery. You are an American, you don't know. Head in sand. Just kidding. Write me some more pornography." All this made me wonder. But then it was followed immediately by a sudden

glimpse of what I would come to see so much more of, although in unexpected ways.

“I have problems with being an Asian woman.”

“Why?”

“You know – that we are sex dolls and all like that.”

“I can understand. That’s how you’ve been portrayed.”

“Yes.”

“But you obviously are very intellectual.”

“I’m not intellectual, I’m artistic.”

“Ok.”

“But I still have this problem. It’s hard for me to shake it out of my mind.”

“When do you want to meet in person?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” she replied. And I didn’t hear from her for several days after that.

That evening, the evening of my visit to Dr. Yang, I was once again visited by my flashbacks. It was always the same thing. After a while I washed several pills down with Tsing Dao beer and a few swallows of the fearful *mi jiou* rice wine, and once again the darkness of a dreamless sleep came over me.

CHAPTER 4

About every two weeks the department met to discuss general business. You were always expected to attend, though in fact I had missed two or three, owing to being hung over or almost incapacitated with the effects of my ongoing insomnia, so I had made a resolution to attend them all from this point on. The meeting was held in a large seminar room downstairs. When I got there, Miss Tang, the department secretary, was setting out tea for all the members. Each of us had a small tea service at our place – a small pot and ceramic teacup next to it. I sat down and took a couple of sips. She smiled and nodded. She always seemed awkward and embarrassed in her dealings with me, always apologizing for her English which yet was perfectly fine. She was a woman of about fifty. Her shoulder length hair fell loosely about, often straying across her forehead in disordered strands when she was busy, as she was now. She wore business

suits in muted colors like gray or dark brown and on her feet sneakers. Two or three other professors came in as she adjusted the blinds of the high windows that ran along the room's one side. Bright sun came in and the off-white blinds showed white-green like honeydew melon in the glare. Sprays of sun fell along the wall behind two recent arrivals who had taken their seats. There was Prof. Lao, a small wiry man with owlish round eyes and glasses and a pale dough-like complexion. Next to him Miss Tsou. She was always called miss since she had never finished her degree, though she had been teaching at the place for twenty years. She wore a long traditional dress like a Vietnamese *dao,* a small gold-fringed collar at her neck. Her black hair was long, reaching to her waist, and on that day was woven in a loose French braid down her back. Then came several linguistics professors. They were in the department officially but tended to keep to themselves and viewed the meetings as a boring nuisance. Prof. Wang, the only one who ever spoke, sat in a gray swivel chair in the corner. The light glared now and then on his thick glasses when he moved his head, his one arm stretched out along the back of the chair next to his. Two or three others came in and took their seats greeting each other. Finally, Professor Kate, one of the other two Americans, arrived. She was a woman in her late or mid 40s who had been teaching in the department for about 15 years, and she was always giving me advice. She was pretty with refined perfect features, striking blue eyes, and long frothy prematurely grey, almost white hair that streamed down her back. She wore long loose-fitting dresses and, often, sandals. She too was in flight from the United States. And I recalled her sitting in my office, her eyes half-closed, shaking her head wearily. "They're bombing again…' she was saying, and this was in response to some recent action of the American government. On this day she sat next to Prof. Linn, someone who had been prominent in the democracy movement of the early 90s and who now, ten years later, continued to be known in the media as a political activist. They had a sort of friendship with obscure political dimensions, about which she gave me slight hints now and then, which yet

were never particularly informative. I noticed on this day that they sat together and seemed to want to continue a conversation they'd had to temporarily suspend. Neither looked at me when they came in. None of the others had either.

It was curious, the attitude of the other members toward me, or perhaps I should say towards us the foreigners, though in fact it wasn't clear to me to what extent we were all placed in the same category or if a special place had been reserved for me specifically, either because I was the most recently arrived or for some other reason, and I sometimes had the impression that it was indeed for some other reason, though what it could be I certainly couldn't say. It often seemed to be a combination of suspicion and embarrassment. There seemed to be also, in some ways allied to the suspicion, something like fear, fear or at any rate a kind of wariness.

Then the two department leaders arrived – Professors Guo and Liou. The latter was a short round person with a peremptory manner like a military officer. She had a full oval face, with at times a slight mustache, and strangely pronounced canines. The other, Professor Guo, was tall and slim with strangely wide-set protruding eyes that gave her something of a frog-like appearance. Her manner was always reserved and, toward me, coolly disdainful. It was she who normally presided over the meetings, and so today she duly took her seat at the head of the seminar table.

The first order of business involved approving thesis proposals. Copies were sent around to each member, and then there was a brief discussion in which the faculty member who was to serve as the adviser acted as a sort of spokesman for the student, with the other profs sometimes playing devil's advocate. The proposals were always approved, though occasionally a note would be sent to the student, by way of the adviser, to clarify this or modify that. The entire thing struck me as cumbersome, but they all seemed in some ways to enjoy it. There were several students who wanted me as their director. "You are so popular," Professor Guo murmured as she looked down at her papers. 'Popular' in her usage seemed to suggest the unsound,

the meretricious, the superficial, all of which was suggested by the resolute way in which she refused to look at me.

“Are there any further comments or questions?” she asked the group. There was silence, and gazes were returned to their teacups. Then the last item of business had to do with money that the university, or perhaps the department specifically – it was never really explained to me which – owed me. This was because after I arrived and in fact began teaching, I was paid nothing for the first three months and as a result had to support myself entirely on my own savings, which had not been easy. I had been given various confusing explanations about why this had been done, and eventually it was agreed that I would be reimbursed that sum. Yet after one year I had not seen any of it. There was to be a vote on whether to send an official request by the department to the administration to the effect that this sum should be paid to me. But now, as a result of the absence of certain members, the issue was once again postponed. I couldn’t help but recall Lu’s words to me in my office about certain parties wanting to make it hard for me to remain. He had said it as a joke, but I had to wonder if there was something to it.

I went back up to my office right after, avoiding anything but brief pleasantries with the others. Lu was not around. The bamboo blinds were still closed, and the place had a brownish dim but active light, like a glass of iced tea. At the windows I looked out past the blinds’ edge. The roofs of the city in the distance shined like mica and quartz in the bright sun. It was getting toward fall, but the sun was still deep and intense and outside the air was still heavy with humidity and that sense of fullness that is late summer. There was a tap on the wooden door. Two faces smiling leaned in. I nodded and said come in. Then there were several more behind them, an almost comical increase. It was the several students from the translation group, as well as Eileen. I motioned for them to take seats, and they all placed themselves around the seminar table.

“We are not sure what the situation is,” Vincent Lee said. He partly stood up with three fingers touched down on the tabletop. He wore a gray blazer, a white knit shirt beneath, and black pants. “Yeah,” Emily added, nodding. Evangeline bobbed her head to emphasize. They were an inseparable duo, always a bit bobbing and weaving in their manner, their outfits tending to feature colorful rags and scraps. “I know others who have it,” Frances said thoughtfully. She sat with her long slender arms folded around herself, pale arms and a mint green tee shirt, beige slacks. Tall, slim always slightly bent, she was meditative seriousness itself, though her teeth always seemed a bit too big for her mouth. She was one of my favorites, though she never said much.

“Well look, the other foreign professors here…” Emily put in.

“Yes,” Vincent agreed.

“Professor Gretchen,” Lillian said. She sat with her forearms forming a triangle on the table. “I don’t like her…strange…” Evangeline said and put three fingertips near her mouth as she cringed with inward laughter. There were giggles from the other girls and awkward, pained smiles. “Yeah,” Jean said. She had an air of discrete acknowledgement as her gaze scanned the table. “She makes me feel strange.” And she shrugged her shoulders. “Yeah, me too,” Linda Ho added. It was unusual for her to speak up like that. Normally she was quiet and contained and seemed to be silently observing things from a distance.

“Professor Kate, too,” Jean said.

“I like her she’s so nice.” Linda responded.

“No,” Evangeline said.

“Yes, you just don’t know her.”

“Anyway,” Lilian said, “my mother works there.”

“Works where?” I asked.

“In the administration, the vice president’s office.”

“And my older sister too,” Jean added.

“They can find out what the details are.”

I had an impression of an intelligence operation conducted in an obscure region from which rumors emerged, vague and troubling. But this was dispelled by the cascade of gold light that was falling past the honeycomb-colored wood of the table as I opened the blinds. Just then D. knocked and peered in. I smiled at her, and she stepped in and made her way to the table. She sometimes took time off from her teaching job to give me tutorial hours in my office. Vincent smiled, squinting a bit, his heavy mask-like features caught in the light. Mike in his pencil-gray formal suit, who had been looking down at the floor as though calculating, looked up and grinned. D. looked quickly at each person around the table, as though to check to see if they were comfortable. If we had been drinking tea, she would have been watching to see whose cup should be refilled. Then she sat down next to Eileen, who also had come in late.

"Yeah, we can do it," Jean announced brightly.

"We'll find out what's going on."

"I can try to find out."

"Yes, we can try."

"We can just go there – ask".

"Tina's aunt worked there," Evangeline said.

"Where?"

"In the Dean's office. Maybe she knows something."

During all this Eileen had sat silently with a troubled look on her face. I knew it would be utterly outside all protocols to do this, to have a group of graduate students investigate such a delicate issue. This would be doubly so in the case of a foreign professor and especially one from that country with which the place had such difficult ambiguous relations, relations of complex dependence and yet enforced distance, the dependence itself creating perhaps a seething suppressed hostility. As I thought of all this, I realized that the room was still. They were all looking at me expectantly. I did not really want to do it, but I felt I had no one else I could really trust.

“All right,” I said. “Tell them thank you. I would appreciate their help.”

“Do you want me to set up a meeting with the Dean?” Eileen asked.

“Yes, all right. I think that would be good.” I wondered what the reaction of various parties would be when they found out. But I knew that I had to do this. How could I stay here otherwise, I thought.

CHAPTER 5

In such a crowded place, I was yet very much on my own. Loneliness destroys the soul. We do not need to debate whether the soul exists, since it is that which is destroyed by loneliness. I couldn’t help but think of her, at first only a bit, but after a while more and more. I don’t remember which of us emailed the other first. She might have been the first to reach out, but in my memory, I recall her being in a way rather ambivalent, in any case.

“How have you been?” I wrote.

“Ok. And you?”

“All right. I was wondering if we could have lunch or dinner sometime.”

“I don’t know…”

“Why not?”

“I’m very busy right now.”

“I see.”

“I’m sure you are too. How is it going there?”

“It’s ok. I’m out of place, but that is normal for me lol.”

“I see. Well, I hope you don’t feel that way all the time.”

“Well, whenever you’re free…”

“I might be this Thursday sometime.”

“Ok, great.”

A day later she more or less summoned me:

“There’s a restaurant near where live if you would like to try it.”

“For lunch or dinner?”

“It would have to be dinner. I’m working all day. As usual.”

The restaurant she mentioned was in a particular region of the city, Hsindien, in the far south and near the river. We sat at an outdoor table under an awning, looking out onto the river where it flowed silently between stone banks, the farther bank being sheer cliffs two hundred feet high, pale in the dark. It was night now and the river was onyx black. A few white boats, spaced far apart, moved along it. They were rowboats with couples in them. Some had small lanterns affixed that threw yellow light onto the water. A wooden bridge held together with ropes went over the river, rising about two hundred feet above it. It was the width of a two-lane highway, but it was made of wood and held together with rope, and so it was only for pedestrians. Mei-Hwa wanted to take a walk over it to show me. It seemed to represent a part of Chinese culture that she wanted me to know about, although her main interests, it was clear, were elsewhere. So we crossed over the bridge to the opposite side where there were lanterns like glowing apricots and walking paths and stone benches. She wanted to show me around but was also testing me in little covert ways, opening my oven door and giving me little pokes now and then to see if I would do. I’m

not sure what she determined, but she did decide that she was hungry, so we crossed back over to go to the restaurant there and have dinner.

The plank and rope bridge seemed in some way a living thing. Stepping onto it you entered a new plane, a new condition, like being levitated on a swing as a child – a momentary lightening, the world not quite so serious suddenly. But then this passed as you made your way across. The feel of it then was like being on a ship – swaying wooden planks under your feet, a feel of huge mass and weight that yet was levitated by a soft and irresistible power, rope cables rising up into a kind of tent fifty feet above, and we sailed with great slowness across the night, swaying a bit, two hundred feet in the air. The night air was warm and humid. Confused small groupings of people, like the ends of a frayed rope, were crossing from one side of the river to the other. The water was too far down to give reflections. We could hear the voices of the couples and the sounds of dipped oars and laughter coming up and echoing off the high rock face. Some of the boats were in the shape of swans and had little canopies. They seemed to drift in a space that had neither time nor motion, yet with the high straight wall of granite hanging over them.

Arranged at our table, plastic-coated menu cards were billboards we tossed aside on our sightseeing tour – they got in the way of our quickly painted-in landscape. We put them aside and turned our high beams on each other. A glass bowl was between us on the wire-framed table. A lit match throbbed in the candle's memory, deep inside a glass jar. Mei-Hwa was guarded and wary, not wanting to tell me where she lived, nor where she worked, and of course I didn't pursue it. She continued her assessing efforts. Indeed, when she met me at the subway – she was afraid I might get lost, which was sweet of her – she took one glance at me, and a brief expression of displeasure darted through her face. Then she recovered herself and was alternately cordial and brittle the whole evening.

"What is your research about?" she asked.

I said what it was about.

“I see,” she nodded.

“And your colleagues must be –” And here she named several Taiwanese academics, a couple of whom were known in the media as political activists. I nodded yes, making as little of it as possible, and in fact I really didn’t know how much to make of it, not having the right system of weights and measures. And none of these people had ever spoken to me anyway.

“Those are some very well-known people,” she observed.

“Are they?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. She seemed somewhat troubled.

“How long do you think you will stay here?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you like it so far?” She looked up, her gaze searching my face.

“So far, yes.”

“Many foreigners don’t. They think it’s…” Here she hesitated. “… backward maybe. Not as many conveniences…things like that.”

“I see,” I said. “To me it seems like a more natural way of life.” She nodded.

“Have you been to the United States much?”

“Yes, a few times,” she said. “Very different.”

“But here,” I said, “it seems to me that people are more sensible. They know what is important and put that first.” She shrugged her shoulders a little while still looking down at her plate. “Their family,” I went on. “Things like that.”

“I must be more westernized,” she said. “I never wanted that. Just my work.”

“Your novels?”

“Yes, and journalism, a certain amount that I do. I feel it is maybe the most important thing I do. Make people understand certain things… realities…you know…” She looked at me. “…that they might not know about.”

“Hmm.”

A waiter passed with two couples being seated a few tables down, and she leaned forward to me against the flutter. “So far…”, she went on, looking down at the candlelight, the candle throbbing and blooming, giving her face a ghostly orange blush, “it’s the most well-known things I’ve done. I would rather my novels would be, but –” Here she looked up and then back down.

“How many are there?”

“Three so far. My fourth I’m working on now…the most difficult.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“Maybe most personal,” she said, shaking her head a bit. “I don’t know. We are taught to keep everything inside. Especially women. Men too. But women a lot. Men can have outlet – drinking…whatever…women have… maybe just each other…or nothing.”

“It’s about that?”

“Hmm yes.”

There was a wary politeness about her, and there seemed little romantic interest on her part. She had a rounded, charming face with a kind of rose bud mouth and fascinating very oval eyes. Her hair was long to her shoulders and cut in way that gave her a sort of crow’s wing across her forehead. I thought she was rather alluring, and the complex alert intelligence that emanated from her only made me more interested. But it was all quite one-sided. Eventually she even seemed rather bored. I wasn’t surprised when she walked me back to the station and, as she fed me through the turnstile, gave me a quick antiseptic little squeeze on the arm.

CHAPTER 6

The next afternoon I was back in my office. The still harsh autumn sun made bars of light and shadow along the wall in front of the high wooden bookcases the department had given me. There was a knock on the door and Eileen appeared. I briefly had the feeling that she was avoiding eye contact, but then she raised her face and gave me a quick bright smile. "Here," she said, setting a load of papers down on my desk. She meant ten new thesis proposals. I was bombarded with more grad students wanting to work with me than I could really handle. "Well, ok," I said. "I'll have to go through them. "Would you like to sit down and have some tea?" I had been learning how to make a halfway decent oolong tea, and D. had given me a little brown ceramic pot and a set of four small cups. They sat on a small refrigerator the office was provided with. "No thank you," she said. "I have to do errands." I knew that she worked as an assistant for two other professors. Just then there was another knock at the door. It was professor Kate who craned her head around the door edge, saw she was interrupting, ducked her head by way of apology, and vanished back behind the door.

"They keep you busy," I said.

"Oh yes. Is there anything else now?" she asked.

"No, I think that's it."

“Ok. Well then I’ll go now.”

“Ok.”

Almost as soon as Eileen had left, there was another knock. I recognized the light tentative tap. “Yes?” I said. It was Kate again and I had to wonder how she knew so exactly when to appear.

“Are you busy? she asked.

“No, that’s fine.” She took this as an invitation and stepped in.

“Sit down,” I said. She was a tall slim woman, willowy as they would have said, her blonde hair a bit silvery, almost like willow leaves flashing in a breeze. She took up the armchair in the middle of the room. The wings of the bookcase were partly opened and her face was reflected in two glass panes at different angles.

“Well,” she said, “Lu mentioned to me about some of these money issues…”

“I see.”

“The reimbursement. And then your raise.” She placed an emphasis on the last word. “Are you thinking of going back?”

“Back?”

“To the US.”

“No. Why?

“I was just wondering. Or moving into Taipei?”

“No. Why?”

“Well, I just had the feeling you might be leaning in that direction. It’s probably better not to, you know, at your stage.”

“Stage?

“Yes, you have a tenue decision coming up. Come to think of it, why don’t you come over for dinner sometime. We have to discuss some of this, especially the tenure. It’s a little different here. Are you still having that translation group of girls meeting at your apartment?

“They’re not just girls.”

"Oh, well that's good."

"Yes, we meet there sometimes. Sometimes here, sometimes there. Do you know them?"

"Yes, of course. I did that for a while too. Well anyway, I just wanted to come by, mainly to invite you over. I'm not sure I understood everything Lu was telling me. When would you be free?"

"Anytime, it's up to you, whenever…"

"All right, good," she said. "I'll let you know.'

"Ok."

"I have to do a bunch of things right now, but I'll be in touch." And she let herself out.

That evening the little translation group met at my apartment. D. was there first as usual,

going about getting things ready for the others, making tea, setting out a plate of *feng li su.*.

"When are they supposed to be here?" she asked.

"They said they would be a little late tonight."

"Ok. Why?"

"I'm not sure. I think Evangeline said she couldn't find her book."

"She is always like that."

"I see."

"We know each other from grade school." And here she gave a little ironic smile. I was always struck by how seriously they took the connection with their school classmates, *tong xuei.* It was as if having been in the same college class or the same high school amounted in their mind to a bond for life.

Then after a bit they did arrive. A few girls and then two guys who came later. We were engaged in attempting to translate an entire volume of poetry, a famous one in the country, called *Seven Miles of Fragrance* – elegant and graceful poems of love and loss. I found them evocative and yet sharp-edged insofar as I could make them out.

“She is too graceful for our modern world,” Jean said

“You said elegant before,” Lillian said.

“Well it’s true.”

“So you don’t want to do it?” Emily said.

“No, that’s ok. I’m just saying.”

“Do you like this tea?” D. asked, pouring her some.

“Yes,” she said after tasting it. Then D. went about pouring some for everyone. People smiled and nodded appreciatively.

“It’s like Hou Hsiao Hsien,” Evangeline said.

“How so?” I said.

“It is an older stage of our Taiwan culture.” Jean said.

“Sadness. City of Sadness,” Mike said, falling in step.

“Yes – everything sad. Everything – tradition, looking back,” Vincent added.

“Yes,” Jean agreed.

“I want to look forward!” Evangeline said and raised one fist outward toward the wall like stretching a band. It was a gesture that mimed ‘yay’. Everyone laughed.

“I wanted to come to see you this afternoon, but Dr. Gretchen got there first. I saw her just as she went in,” Francis said. She had been silent up to then, and a bit worried looking.

“Oh, you could come later.”

“I didn’t want to bother you.”

“Speaking of her, Where is Dr. Gretchen anyway?” Emily said.

“She would always make me run in the other direction anyway,” Evangeline said. At this, all the girls giggled.

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Well anyway…” D. said.

“Yes, let’s not get into –” Lillian said. The two guys looked down.

“But we are modern girls, so we can discuss,” Evangeline said.

“Modern Taiwan girls, so we don’t discuss…” Lillian said.

“Ok ok…”

“Taiwan, not China?” I asked. I was always curious what the reaction would be on this point.

“Taiwan.”

“Taiwan.”

“Taiwan.”

The two guys laughed, seeming to second the feeling.

“Have you been there?” I asked them.

“Oh yeah.” Mike said.

“Went to see the Great Wall – it was ok,” Vincent said with a shrug.

“I don’t like the food.”

“Yeah.”

“Too salty. *Tai hsien*.”

“Yea.”

“People too pushy.”

“They always want to get something from you.”

“Yeah I went there twice. I didn’t like it.”

After the others left, Mike, Vincent, and D. stayed behind. Eileen arrived a few minutes later. We sat together at the table. To our left, there was the large window looking out into the night. One could discern very dimly the outline of the mountain.

“Well so,” I said, what did you need to tell me?”

“On the student bulletin board – you know they have this thing they put messages for each other…”

“They are saying some bad things about you,” Eileen said.

“What?”

“That you miss classes a lot.”

“That you are still under the influence of the sleeping pills in class,” Mike said.

“Or that you act strange,” Eileen added.

“Different things like that,” Vincent said.

“That you lose your place, get mixed up, seem like you…” here Eileen broke off.

“You know, things like that.”

“And we went to the administration,” she said.

“You mean…?”

“Yes, our relatives helped. And we went. Just like we said.”

“You did?”

“Yes.”

“They all worked there. They know lots of people,” Mike said.

“Everyone.”

“We don’t know why you wouldn’t have it.”

“Others do.”

“Other foreign teachers.”

“Someone says one thing, someone else says something different,” Vincent said.

“So, we don’t know.”

“But we will,” he said.

I was a bit worried at this, but I said nothing. I was reluctant to get into it with the administration myself. But what would the reaction be if they concluded that I sent
them – students – to take care of my business. I wondered if it could be a disastrous wrong move.

Later that night, alone, I was plagued again by the same inner problems – the anxiety, the insomnia, and the feeling of being haunted by the images of war and war crimes. I did not want to return, despite the growing feeling that there was no way I could stay. And indeed there seemed to be forces at work who were determined to force me to leave. I could only speculate about who they might be and why.

CHAPTER 7

The sunrise came with razors and needles of light. They came through the clouds that hid the mountain's crest – gold orange light with points of green haunting through lacy membranes. The flanks of the mountain were still dark. The street below was like slate. The light was slanting down the fronts of buildings. There were cyclists here and there as I left to catch the early city bus. This then became the large and quiet bus into Taipei, as the country, the still obscure country, flowed past the plate glass window. What was the country? Did I understand any of it? And yet coming into the city, as I saw it spread out in its special beauty, how I love you Taipei, I thought once more, as I often did, coming in, approaching from the south, slowing into the central station, getting off there, handing the driver my ticket as one did, making my way across the bridge and catching a yellow cab near the station, the back seat fragrant with some aromatic air freshener, a beadwork seat cover on it, the neat polite driver – and I was taken over to the one side of town, to the Linn Senn Bei Lu, which was known as a red light district but which was also the place where there was a group of Philippine bars and restaurants – the Malibu, the Peace Jazz Bar – and the others, and at one of the others – it was the only one where I could get a decent hamburger – there was Charlene from Manila, the owner, who was always trying to get me to run off with her, or at least so she liked to pretend. After I had done with my different errands – another appointment with Dr. Yang, a trip to the national library, another to the library at Tai Da – I took a cab over to that part of town.

It was the afternoon by now and I sat beside her – Charlene – on the sofa that faced the bar's picture window. The door was open, a harsh light like

tin came from the surface of the narrow street outside – the air was still warm and a breeze came in bringing the scent of frying meat and burning paper. On the other side of the alley, the girls from one of the rival pubs were burning prayer leaflets in silver buckets. Set out on tables were various types of fruit and sweet cakes that were offerings to the spirits. It was an elaborate ritual that required one girl to tend the small fires in the special silver pales while another tossed in the leaflets. These were about the size of small napkins, brown in color and with characters written on them – Buddhist prayers. At the same time, the things laid out on the table had to be prayed over, using sticky cattail-like wands of magenta-colored incense, the girl devotee bowing three times in the direction of the offering while holding three lighted sticks before her face. Charlene sat in her armchair – I had bought her a vodka and tonic – and seemed to regard all this with silent amusement and irony. “The Chinese,” she seemed to be thinking, “they’re super sane and super crazy both.” In spirit, I suppose, I had to agree with her. Actually, I would have liked to have gone over to that pub, since it had unquestionably the most beautiful girls, but Charlene, who was much more my age, held me spell bound with her dark eyes, her little smile, and the warm touch of her fingers running up and down my arm.

“You too nervous. You need to relax more. You should come with me to the Philippines. I take you diving. You see the fish. It very pretty.”

“Later. Later later.”

“Did you pray yet? I am catholic. I pray every day. How bout you? No? That your problem, you don’t believe. I believe. I pray. Eh, I have good luck, no?”

She motioned with her delicately dimpled chin, raising it just a bit and meaning to indicate the premises we were sitting in, a pub of about 75 seats, everything very clean and new, two large windows with low armchairs before them facing the busy alleyway. The girls across the way hurried in and out, tending their silver pails of fire and their offerings and joss sticks. Charlene continued drawing idle figures in the sand of my

forearm. She stared out at the ally some more, not watching the girls any longer but as though assessing the place itself, a narrow smile on her ruby-painted lips. She lifted her chin again, her eyes slightly narrowed, gleaming in the early evening light that tinted the walls of the pub a pale copper. Wei-tzu, the bar tender, a stolid middle-aged woman in a green-striped tee shirt and white apron began turning on some lights here and there. I left Charlene to her own thoughts. After a moment, she drew a thin cigarette from a silver case, lit it, and blew smoke up toward the windowpane. The light was clouded with swirls of smoke as water is when you brush your hand along the sandy bottom. I could see that her lipstick had dyed the end of her cigarette's filter. She gave me an inquiring look, raising one eyebrow and pointing at the silver case.

"No thank you."

"Mmm that's good. Don't start," she said, waving the cigarette at me and blowing more smoke. "Very bad. I only smoke a little."

"I thought you had a date."

"Oh yeah," she said, as though one were mentioning a dental appointment. "Later. Over at the Malibu. You like the food there?"

"Not bad."

"Mmm," she said as she took another drag.

"Someone from Japan?" She smiled.

"Who told you?"

"We were talking," I said, nodding my head toward the bar tender who was busy washing glasses.

"See, that's your problem," she said. I was on my third beer and so was becoming more receptive to her insights.

"What? That I don't offer prayer leaflets to the gods?"

"No, that you don't come to Manila with me – we go to the beach, you unwind. You are too tense." As the girls tossed more handfuls into the fiery pales, I couldn't help but think of the famous painting by Millais. But then in another moment a different image came to me, and I was nearly having

another one of my episodes, but I got a grip on it. Charlene could tell I wasn't listening.

"What you thinking of now?" she said.

"Nothing."

"The thing you told me before?"

"Yes."

"You have to forget. Is no point. You still have to take the pills to sleep?"

"Yes. Is Taiwan east or west?" I asked.

"Is both, like Philippines. Combination."

I got back late that evening, took a quick glance at my email, and went to bed. It must have been because I was drunk that I failed to see Eilene's email to me, and in fact I wouldn't for some days. The next day, however, I did check in on the dating site. Just in case. And I was surprised to find that Mei-Hwa had left several messages for me. They seemed ambivalent, as usual, but still they were there.

"I was wondering how you were. *Hao jiu bu jien*."

"I'm ok."

"Still trouble sleeping? I recall your telling me."

"I'm surprised you remember."

"Of course."

"Yes, still trouble."

"Why? do you think."

"Things cling to my mind that shouldn't, but there seems nothing I can do."

"I'm sorry to hear."

"Thank you for asking."

"Mei guan xi. How is your Chinese coming?"

"I am too stupid or lazy."

"I see."

“Did you want to get together again?”

“I don’t know. I was wondering myself. What do you think? I am very busy of course.”

“Of course.”

“As always but…if you would like.”

And so, we agreed on a day and time.

Past the nighttime bus window, the rain made slanting chaff that jeweled the dark portal with small luminous beads. We pulled into the stop – it wasn’t the main station but a streetside stop that yet had several other buses parked at it, like a caravan. The driver made his announcement and opened the door, and we filed out. Outside in the rainy night a slanting spray fell past white-blue streetlights. The road’s shoulder – there was no sidewalk – held ink-black oval puddles. Up ahead there was a kind of public square with shops and eating places and, around its rim, covered open-air markets where vendors, sitting on small plastic chairs protected from the rain by canvas tarpaulins, were selling every type of small merchandise – bracelets watches rings necklaces pants shirts shoes gloves scarves and every other type of clothing you could think of. I walked in the general direction of the address she had given me, where there were some brightly lit cafes. Then as though from out of a narrow crevice between the rain itself and the cafe lights, a graceful dark shape came toward me. She must have been waiting somewhere near the bus stop and I hadn’t seen her. I didn’t recognize her at first. She was all different. Her hairstyle created a more graceful shape that harmonized with her somewhat rounded features – later I would sometimes tease her about her “Japanese face,” as she herself called it. She seemed to be dressed more carefully, and she was noticeably slimmer. But there was something different in her expression as well – a certain wariness had been changed into a sort of expectancy that subtly lit her gaze and within which flickered a teasing, bantering humor.

“Hey. Hello,” she said. “I’m glad you could make it.” She fell in step beside me, making a little gesture of her hand as though to guide me in the right direction. “Right over here. It’s just a plain simple place, I’m really busy.”

She led me to a small hole-in-the-wall eating place, one whole side of which was entirely open to the street. There was a bare concrete floor and about ten silver flecked white tables where people sat with their coats on. In the corner was the cooking area where *laubahn,* the owner, stood behind a counter with a gas range and tended various steel pots and woks. We sat down at one of the tables. In the center there was a small pot of grainy red chili paste and beside it a silver holder like a clasp that held pink paper napkins. She had on a black quilted jacket and sat somewhat hunched with her collar up, looking out at the rain. Sometimes she looked over and smiled at me. For a moment I thought she was going to take my hand, but then she didn’t. A girl came over and Mei-Hwa ordered for both of us and our bowls of soup noodles came and we sat there eating and watching silver threads of cold rain falling straight down from the edges of the tin roof. A faint mist lingered over the street gutter which was only a few feet past the open-air wall. There was a kind of pale yellow light in the place. Mei-Hwa looked up at me, taking a break from her noodles, which she’d been eating rapidly. She had clearly been quite hungry.

“Been working so hard.” She gave a little toss of her head: “It’s good to take a break.” Then, in an afterthought, she gave me a broad smile. I hadn’t noticed till then how distorted her teeth were. She covered her mouth and ducked her chin. “Oh don’t look. My teeth are terrible.”

“I wasn’t thinking that. I’d just never seen you have such a big smile before.”

“It’s cuz I’m happy that you’re here.”

“I see.”

“That you could come.”

“What are you so busy with?”

"Oh, you know – projects. One is a journalist piece. Long report about the fishermen and their families. You know, especially on the coast – the east coast, all these villages. And it is very dangerous – fishing."

"Yes."

"Typhoons, all these things…. And they sometimes have these huge mud slides – like avalanche, except mud – from the hills. The whole village can be destroyed. We want the government to help more." After we finished our noodles we ordered some beer – three cans of Taiwan beer in their red white and blue striped cans, two for me and one for her – and sat there for a while drinking and watching the rain. The crowd streamed by outside. As so often, I felt the beauty of the wonderful unpretentious quality that the place always had – not poor but basic, fundamental – in this case the chilly but beautiful weather, the night, the simple plain food, even the bare concrete floor with its dustiness.

"What are you thinking?" she asked me.

"Nothing," I said. And then, "It's beautiful." Meaning the night, the rain, the little place. And she knew what I meant. "Yes," she smiled and nodded and took a sip of her beer. After a moment she reached over and took my hand and held it for a few seconds, then let it go. It was getting late now, and the last bus would be leaving soon.

"What time is it?" she asked.

"Almost nine."

She nodded. "You have to leave. Last bus."

"Yes."

"And I have to get back to work." She gave a slow toss of her head as though pointing to a distant building with her ear.

"You work too much."

"I know. Cannot help though."

Then we got up and walked through the rain back toward where the buses would be stopping. As we went along the crowded street with no sidewalk, I had her walk on the inside, a half-unconscious gesture that she

more or less complied with, and we both pulled up our collars against the rain that had gentled now to a dim downward aerosol.

"Should have brought my umbrella," I said. "Mmm," she agreed, squinting her eyes in amusement. But we both loved the weather and the night, beautiful in their own way. And as we walked our hands lightly interlocked. Then we were at the bus stop and not a moment too soon, since the bus was just about to pull in. We turned to face each other and I took her startlingly slight frame into my arms and she let me do it. I felt so tender and protective toward her at just that moment. And then there was a kiss. But of these we know that there are many kinds. What kind was this one? Somewhat impulsively I mentioned this to her – that it was a certain kind that I had not expected. She seemed amused. "Something is exchanged there," she said and gave me a look which I did not known how to interpret at the time, though only later did I realize this.

Two days later we got together again, this time in the afternoon. She picked me up at the main station just as I stepped off the bus – with my umbrella this time. It was pouring rain out, a steady silver somewhat misty rain. There was a buffet restaurant that she had heard about and wanted to try, so we drove over to Shih Linn, a somewhat northern part of the city, to try it out. It was a large bright high-ceilinged room with off-white walls, almost a sort of wedding cake, and round white-topped tables. We chose a spot near the windows and sat down. And then something strange happened. A short wiry man in a neat, dark blue suit, close-cropped hair, a careful and serious demeanor like someone working security, appeared at the side of our table smiling and bowing, his hands clasped before him. He was the owner and he was welcoming us personally and rather elaborately. His English was excellent, precise, almost unaccented: *so wonderful to see you here, if there is anything you need or anything you would like just let me know, I'm sure we can get it for you*, his smile, urging, frozen, *we are so happy to have you as our guest* He went on for perhaps half a minute, making slight bows repeatedly the whole time, his hands knotted almost as

though in prayer. After he retired, we sat there, embarrassed and silent. So much was unspoken between us in that moment, so much of it having to do with the effects of huge historical events on the small and fragile lives of ordinary people. It was as if terrible and invisible presences stalked suddenly through the bright luminous room. Then she seemed to want – consciously, deliberately – to change the mood. “You look nice,” she said. And then “very different,” she added with an amused sharp look. “I don’t mean you didn’t look nice before.”

“I see,” I said as she smiled at me over a thoughtful lower lip. Steam came from her small white cup. Then there was another change of mood. She seemed to have many of these, and now it was to set the stage for a confiding. She shook her forehead free of something and began to tell me her story. Her dog had recently died. But this was rather serious because when she was twenty-five and living with her first serious boyfriend, she had gotten pregnant. Actually, it had happened twice and both times she had had to go through the trauma, this was the word she used They had broken up eventually, they had been living in a certain part of the city, Jong He, a working class area with its dust-lined streets and junk yards and bad smelling water and noisy Cantonese neighbors, and she had taken up with a succession of young women and had lived with three of them and had in this way more or less forgotten men, and yet not really, and then at a certain point she met an American man, like me a teacher, (she used the word teacher) and then through him another American, but one who was of Japanese descent and who was there studying traditional medicine at the famous Institute for Chinese Culture, as well as at various clinics and in the offices of several practitioners, and he said that he would like to improve his Chinese, and so of course they became lovers, although not right away. She seemed to want to tell me as much as possible about her past. It was important for her that I understand at least some aspects of her life and of her history, and especially of this latter. I had the impression that she thought I might not understand her life itself, if I may use that phrase, but

she thought that I might understand the history that this life was and had been, at least what it was at a certain depth. The trauma, the two traumas, were an important part, but then the parting from her Japanese lover, this was how she referred to him, was even more important. After him she had embarked on what one might call an aggressive course of study in men per se, which was how we had met, and why (although, at that time, she had to admit, smiling at me in a mischievous teasing way, I was not exactly her cup of tea.)

I tried to be amused but something about the whole episode continued to bother me. So that when we finally left, I asked her to stop at one of the numerous 7/11s that pock mark the city so that I could get what I knew I would need. She gave me an indulgent understanding look, the full meaning of which I also could not have known at the time, and drove me to one. I had some of my pills with me, but I always needed something to wash them down with. I walked into the clean antiseptic somewhat chilly bright shoebox the place was, smiled and nodded in response to the clerk's friendly *"mei guong ling*" and drew from the cooler a six pack of Taiwan beer along with a tall bottle of Tsing Dao to go with it, and the clerk – a polite shy friendly young guy, so Taiwanese with his dark complexion and broad flat nose and his sweet good nature – slid it all into a plastic bag, and I paid him with the pink and purple currency, their densely-threaded almost woven feel briefly across my fingertips as I slid them over, and then walked back to the car where she was waiting, watching me through the windshield, tilting her head to one side as though inquiring. She said nothing but just smiled minimally over a tense lower lip the way she so often did, and we drove to the hotel that she was familiar with.

We entered the lobby where everything seemed to be in shades of brown – brown floor tiles, brown leather chairs, brown paneling on the walls, I with my cache of beer, Mei-Hwa with her large purse slung over her shoulder. She didn't seem to have a reservation but was asking about an available room with this strange American man in tow. The female clerk

seemed entirely unconcerned, and it was also clear that Mei-Hwa in her relaxed casual manner had done this sort of thing many times before. Indeed, she was very familiar with the place as she herself had said, with her little grin.

Now it was not a night in a small dusty eating place, it was an afternoon of rain, of cold steam rain, gun smoke rain, and the large hotel room with the dark green carpet and high ceiling and huge windows looking out onto the buildings near the campus of the Shi Da Teacher's University was cold and had the feel of a waiting room, as she pulled her dark blue turtle neck off over her head showing me the white skin of her stomach and the pink up turned points of her breasts and then her smiling face amid its cornsilk of black hair. The sheets were very white and somewhat chill as she slid herself beside me.

Later, afterward, I slipped from bed, got my stash of beer, and my pills from the pocket of my pants that I picked up from the floor beside the bed, and sat in a large green armchair by the window. I remember it was a large high window with at first a curtain that reminded me of a moth's wing, but I pulled this aside and sat back down looking out over the rooftops. We must have been on a high floor – I actually don't recall – since ranged below was a whole
cityscape of different size and color roofs at varied heights, and I sat there drinking and watching the steady cold misty rain come down on all of it. The sky was full of dark soot-colored clouds. The mountains were not visible. She watched me from the bed, and I was aware of a vague indulgent but troubled smile at certain moments. But I had no very clear awareness of her and she knew this and was letting me have my privacy. I don't remember how long I sat there like that, but it must have been for quite a while. It was as if the entire tragedy of years, of decades, was spread out before me, but even this I was only dimly aware of. Later, afterward, I must have gotten back into bed. By now the room was quite dark and I remember that her

pale body reminded me of lilies seen in an unlit room, and then there was her knowing smile.

The next day lying on the bed in my apartment in the afternoon – the weather had changed and there was a bright sun out, an almost clear sky with high clouds flowing off toward the mountains – I watched the off-white window shade fringed with bright sunlight toss silently back and forth in a pendulum motion as the building swayed rhythmically beneath me. It was one of the numerous small earthquakes that happen all the time. But for some moments – I must have just woken up from sleep – I didn't know where I was. Then after a little while an odd thought occurred to me – that in the extreme west of China there is a large desert, the Taklamakan desert, and that the name is said to mean 'you go in there, you don't come back.' But I also recalled that, actually, no one knew for sure what it really meant. I had given her my own email – as opposed to just the one on the site – and when I checked it later that day, I found a message from her.

"I've been searching for you for years," she wrote. "And now I've finally found you. You cannot believe how happy I am."

The next night I was in my office catching up on some grading and other paperwork. It was rather late. The place was deserted and quite silent. I was startled when my cell phone rang. Of course, it was her. In an almost conspiratorial whisper, she asked what I was doing. I told her and then she asked if I was in my apartment and I told her no, that I was in my office. And then she asked if she could come to see me. I was surprised but before I could say anything she went on that she'd been working all morning and then on an impulse had taken some time off to visit the shops and food stalls of Dan Shui where she was careful to buy all sorts of little things for me – some tea from Chia Yi, small square pineapple cakes from a bakery in Tai Chong, a special sort of vegetarian *tsong* tz that she thought I might like, calling me Stevie the whole time, as later she always did when she was happy. But despite her seemingly cheerful mood there was an

undercurrent of something else. It was as though she not only wanted to see me but in fact needed to, and I felt that by not letting her come over I would be causing her to worry or causing her some other sort of pain. So I said all right.

The weather had turned again. Perhaps a typhoon was coming. The building was a ship going through the rain, the rain was numerous voices whispering into the silent building. The rainy night was black silk drawn down past the unshaded window and ripping its seams apart on the building's invisible corners. She arrived an hour later. And my phone rang.

"Are you alone?" she said.

"What do you mean?" I said. "Yes, I'm alone."

"Ok, just wondering. So can I come up?"

"Yes. I'll have to come down. The building's probably locked."

"No, someone was down there and they let me in."

"Oh ok." I said. I was a little surprised at this but let it pass. "I'll come out to meet you."

"I'm already in the hallway."

I stepped out of the office and saw her at the extreme end of the corridor. It was very dimly lit, but as she got closer, I could see the odd expression on her face – some of the same lit up expectancy I had seen before, but now instead of a humorous edge there was a kind of intentness of a peculiar kind. Then we stood together in the middle of the office, and I had just shut the door. She stepped over to the black leather couch and stretched out on it, her gaze very fixed. Like the night outside, she had her black silk things, but then they were pulled away, and her breast was suddenly bare, her face was an oval of sand at the bottom of a stream and a current was touching it, framing it, brushing away distractions and her nipples were as though when someone offers coins to a begging man holding them out on the flat of the fingers first one and then the other, one and then the other disappearing into his mouth, and he must have seemed to be blowing into her now as though into a horn for a long time as he

coaxed the notes that came from her open mouth silently, as she lay on the black leather couch where a wax colored moonlight had placed two windows on the wall behind, as she stood and seemed to be stepping up from two black leaves onto the dock wet with moonlight, and she drew one shoulder and then the other one from her blouse, which hung heavily like black trailings from a line drawn up, her one strap looped on her upper arm the way it might have been on a clothes line earlier that day and he felt the sunshine in her belly, on her skin, he breathed it in her hair, searching for the sun with his mouth at the back of her neck, and she let him do this and then she let the last silk fall down into the water that had made a boat slip of ivory colored light around the couch; he was in front of her seeming to be made of wax, he was a waxen leopard crouching and she put her fingertips in the half-melted skin of the candle and she gathered the leopards spots and smeared them over herself, feeling how warm it was and smooth, and then there were two arrows and the tip of the smaller one was placed between the chevrons of the larger, and they were like two magnets evading each other, smearing sideways and up, repeatedly, so that a throat was pressed onto a mouth, pushing along its length to make it open, and she wrapped both her legs around me. We lay there very still, together, for a long time. I wondered if anyone had seen her come in or if anyone had heard.

She said she'd be too busy for the next few days but invited me to come see her in the middle of the week. I took the bus in one afternoon and we met at a coffee place near the main station. I sat there waiting for her, but before long she pushed her way through the front door, caught sight of me right off and gave me a big smile and wave. She had black pants on and a blue jean jacket, and as she strode toward me she reached around and plucked some of her thick onyx hair from where it had bunched up at the back of her collar. She gave her nose a little shake as though to say 'darn, always such a rush' and sat down. Her face did look a bit flushed and I noticed once again how rounded her features were – her Japanese face, as

we always said, joking – and yet how lovely and intelligent. It was not the kind of beauty that struck one immediately, but it was the kind that grew on one over time, as though revealing itself by degrees and which seemed also to be connected with her intelligence, her incredible work ethic, even her idealism, which she did indeed have. And yet there was always a kind of perky humor to whatever she did.

"Work work work," she said as she sat down. "All I ever do."

"I guess so."

"How about you? are you writing something new?

"Yes of course," I said. And she gave me a little nod of approval.

"I think I need some coffee," she went on. "I have been up half the night. Revising the journalist piece I told you about, or part of it anyway. And I am working on a novel. And a *play*," she said with a little exclamation on the last word. "Well not really a play. We have this theatre group here, you know." Here she got up and then came back with a large coffee.

"Cloud Gate?" I said.

"No no, not Cloud Gate. Cloud Gate is wonderful, but this is called Shakespeare's Crazy Sisters, sort of feminist… Yes, I am a definite feminist." And she illustrated the last two words *definite feminist* with a jab of her index finger as though taking aim and then pushing some buttons in the air.

"Didn't you say you had to come in last week?" To come in meant come in to Taipei. "I mean other than to see me."

"Yes," I said. "I had to go to Tai Da." "Oh," she nodded. But she didn't ask anything further about it, at which I was glad.

"And you like to go over to the Philippine bars."

"Sometimes," I said.

"You know what is near there? Old red-light district."

"I go there to eat."

"I see. Maybe I should go with you to keep watch."

"Not necessary."

“Hmm, ok.” She took another sip. Then she said, “I want to invite you to see a rehearsal.”

“Of what?”

“Of the play I told you. But it’s not really a play, it’s a theatre piece that will have music, dance, but also words. Using different female characters in Shakespeare. But,” she added, “re-imagining.”

So we drove over to the national theatre, a large complex in the middle of the city. A door man checked her ID and she explained that I was her guest and smiling and with a slight bow he let us both in. She led me through an underground labyrinth of passageways until we emerged into the top row of a small black box theatre where seven or eight female actors and musicians were rehearsing. She exchanged words with a tall, graceful woman named Ahn-Chi who stood at center stage, seemingly lost in thought. Mei-Hwa told me she was a noted performer of Taiwanese opera.

“Here in Taiwan we have our own tradition of opera, you know.” I nodded yes that I did know. And for a moment it really was as though I couldn’t take my eyes from the performer. She moved with so much grace in the small area she had marked out for herself. Yet it was a weighted and deliberate grace where every gesture – all rather small minimal ones – seemed thought out and considered, like a speaker who weighs their words carefully. Mei-Hwa seemed to notice my absorption and for a moment I couldn’t tell what her reaction was. Then she gave me a broad smile and a little nod, happy at seeing me so interested.

“Yes,” I said. “I know. I’ve seen it before.”

“Oh really? where?”

“There was something on the television,” I said and explained how I had seen a televised performance of one of these works. And in fact, I had never seen or heard anything as beautiful. It seemed to be a kind of chamber work, emphasizing grace, subtlety, and a restrained but intricate beauty. “It is your own tradition,” I said. I wanted to acknowledge what was clearly an immense tradition and history. “Yes,” she confirmed. “Very

special.” Meanwhile Ahn-chi moved silently about the stage as though testing space itself. We were both absorbed in watching her, wondering what gesture would follow from each preceding one. At a certain point, Mei-Hwa slipped her hand into mine and held it. Our two hands were down below the level of the seat, so no one saw. Then somewhat unexpectedly Ahn Chi began to sing, at first very softly, again testing space itself, but now in a different way, wanting to see if it would communicate, if it would carry the message she was preparing to entrust to it. Then more loudly, her voice, a rich lyrical alto at once graceful, almost angelic, and yet earthy, resonant, with suggestions of intense passion restrained.

I couldn’t understand any of the words. “Is she singing in Taiwanese?”

“Yes,” Mei-Hwa answered. “Our own language.”

“Can you understand it?”

She smiled and made a little see-sawing gesture of her head as though to say ‘so-so.’ Then the other actresses – there were two who had been standing off to the side – began to move in harmony with Ahn Chi. Mei-Hwa told me that now Ahn-chi was going to be Ophelia. Ahn Chi began to move differently with subtle suggestions of floating and swimming. By this point, too, the three musicians who sat in a group far to stage left began to play. They played western instruments – a cello, a violin, and a flute. It was modern music with extremes of register – the flute exploring its highest voicings, the cello its deepest – at one point the player struck the body, producing a strange percussive sound *pooom* that seemed both loud and soft at once. Mei-Hwa explained that in this performance Ophelia would not drown but would negotiate the water, rising to its surface, its many surfaces, each of which she would use as a stairstep to ascend into the sky. There would also be Juliet, Lady Macbeth, and the three witches, all to be enacted by a single performer.

“I have to take the different texts and sort of extract –” She made a little claw-like movement of her hand. Then she looked at me and smiled. “Kind of tricky. Maybe you help?”

“Of course,” I said.

“And then I have to put in my own text. So it is about how Asian women can look at western models, but also change them.”

We sat together at the small table, two cans of Taiwan beer in front of us. It was the same small eating place as last time. We thought of it as our place now. Then she got up and went over to the counter and returned with a bottle of corona with a wedge of lime in it. “Here,” she said. “You drink that.” And she shoved both cans of Taiwan beer to my side of the table.

“Ok.”

She sat there smiling, looking out at the street which was filling up with couples now that it was the late afternoon.

“Do you think I am very westernized?” she asked and gave me a sort of teasing look.

“I don’t know. I guess,” I said. “You have perfect English.”

“I don’t think it’s perfect. Needs to improve.”

“I think it’s pretty good.”

“You are prejudiced.”

“Maybe so.”

Just then she raised the Corona to her lips. It seemed that the light was caught in it for a second, a brief gold shimmer. The lights in the place – small yellow light bulbs like at a carnival stand – were not on yet. We sat there holding hands, watching the couples in the square. It was the last of the afternoon, in Chinese sometimes called the ‘yellow hour’. On the way back, watching the countryside through the bus window, I knew that I was in love with her. But I wondered also if one’s love for an entire place could be reflected too in one’s love for a single person.

Lu was pacing back and forth in the middle of my office. Then he sat in a chair by the window. Afternoon light coming through the blinds made stripes across his face and shoulders and cast a tilted square of soft gold

onto the wall behind him, so that it looked like he was sitting in some sort of golden cage.

"I doan think" (the emphasis fell heavily on the last word – doan *think*) "that you should haf sent the students to do that *for you*" He emphasized the last two words with a double knock of his forehead against the shadow bars. "You should have gone *yourself."* And here he stood up and began pacing again.

"If you have to do it at all. It looks very bad," he shook his head sideways, both hands in his pockets. "And then on top of that you miss the appointment. The dean is very busy. He is sitting there waiting. This looks very bad."

"Well," I said, "I didn't mean to miss the appointment. I just never got the message." It had been, as it turned out, a message sent by Eileen. And I had been sufficiently distracted by the developments with Mei-Hwa – and then there was the combination of insomnia and hangover –
that I had missed it. Later, after the fact, I saw the message and saw that she had managed to get Dean Chu, James Chu, to agree to see me. But then I had blown it all by not showing up.

"Why didn't you get the message. This is what I'm saying." Here he sat back down, taking his hands from his pockets as he did. He wore a pair of light tan slacks and a similarly colored shirt, the combination making him look like a high-priced car mechanic.

"Are they going to give me the money or not? This has been going on _"

"I want them to give you the money, the reimbursement and the raise both. But you have to do things in the right way."

"And then what about the pension?" I said. I thought it best to go directly to the main issue, and from his reaction it seemed that he was in sympathy with me here as well, but there was something troubling him. It was always noticeable when this subject came up. "Yes, well that is what you sent the students for. To find out about. I understand your concern." He

said this while staring at a certain point just past the shadow bar that lay crookedly across his chest.

I recalled the last meeting with the group of graduate students who had taken an interest in the matter. Where Lu sat in his golden cage there had been Vincent Chen, always formally dressed, serious and reserved, his deep somewhat gravelly voice giving a kind of extra weight to his comments. “We do not want Taiwan to look like some sort of hostile or backward place to a foreign professor. Especially American.”

“I don’t think that has any bearing,” I said

Jean raised her hand almost as though she were in class. “We just want what is fair,” she said, shaking her open palm in the air.

“And it should be clear,” Frances put in. At both these comments they all nodded in remarkable unison. Yet the results of their investigations proved to be ambiguous. It seemed that I did have a pension, which I was contributing to each month, but that it was not clear whether, ultimately, I would be able to draw from it in point of fact, presumably at retirement.

“They did not think it was strange, you know.”

“They didn’t think what was strange?” I said.

“That we would be trying to find out these things for you.”

“They thought it was cute.”

“We love our teacher,” Evangeline said grinning.

“Anyway, they say they don’t know why you can’t have pension,” Vincent said.

“You do,” Mike put in.

“But they say that the government may have a question about getting the full amount,” Vincent added.

“The government has a question for whom?” I said, genuinely puzzled.

“We are not sure,” Vincent said in his careful reflective way.

“I know what your questions and concerns are,” Lu was saying, now, in present time. He raised both hands before his chest as though he were

shaking something. “I made them vote on it,” he said. “You know. You were there.”

“Well I had to leave the room.”

“Well yes, of course. You are junior faculty. But I insisted that they decide these things. But they put it off. Just like the first time. But they at least voted on the reimbursement if not the raise. Gretchen was out of the country, as you know.”

“When’s she coming back?”

“I think in a couple weeks maybe, not sure. But anyway the other, Kate, she voted against you.”

“Really?”

“I was surprised. She told me she would vote *for*, then she voted against.”

“What about her boyfriend, Linn?”

Lu laughed. “Yeah, her boyfriend. Linn is married,” he said as though giving an official announcement. “We don’t know what’s going on there. He voted against too,” he added, as though supplying a largely unneeded footnote. We sat there for a moment in silence. There were the usual noises of people coming and going, some passersby out in the hallway. Then Lu went on: “They stick together.””

“Why?”

“Who knows. One is political activist type. Used to be journalist. Other is theatre, acting plays. But they are both, as you say, dissident maybe. In revolt, always have to question things.”

“Well, she invited me to her place for dinner.”

“Oh really? when is that?

“This week.”

“Ok. Well don’t tell her I told you, that would be awkward for all of us.”

“Don’t worry.”

“What do you think she wants?” he asked.

“I don’t know, but you don’t have to worry. I won’t say anything.”

And then, after some further pleasantries, he left, and I was left wondering what he meant by the phrase ‘all of us.’ Whom did that include? I had to wonder. And I noticed how he had managed to slip away without bringing discussion back around to the issue of the pension. Without that, how could I make it my new home? I would have to return to the place I had come from, and, as my students all knew, that I was in flight from it.

CHAPTER 8

Professor Kate lived in an apartment complex located near the campus, and one way to reach it was by taking a short cut through the edge of the university's property, an area that was kept as a sort of park. It was already dark when I set out for her place. The bus let me off near a utility road that cut through the park area like a zipper through a green fabric. The road led up hill, and after a bit I was able to look down onto the hills that led in unkempt terraces to the floor of the small valley that formed the town's limit. I paused just outside the range of a pole-mounted safety light and looked out into the dense bamboo forest, the branches of the trees wavering in the night wind that was picking up, making their characteristic low clicking sound, casting their ragged shadows onto the illuminated part of the road. I could hardly imagine what it must have been like for the island's early inhabitants, the different indigenous tribes, how hard conditions must have been. Were their spirits, their ghosts, lurking even now in the shadows of the forests that covered the whole island, so much of which was still wild? If they could be summoned, what would they say?

We sat in Kate's small living room after dinner had been cleared away. She was quite a good cook, though dinner had been anything but Chinese – pot roast with carrots, onions, and potatoes. She had a certain way of doing it – "my mother's recipes," she said and then correcting herself "mother and grandmother." Then she added "I get so sick of Chinese food all the time." This was said as she sat in an armchair by the window and blew the smoke from her cigarette past the sill and into the night air outside. The typhoon that had been predicted had not arrived and the atmosphere was beginning to settle down. Even as I was walking up the hill, it felt like a storm would be coming, but now only two hours later, it was clear that wouldn't happen. Instead, there was a kind of stillness. The room faced a small courtyard with stone walkways, trees, and stone benches, the rough-hewn but beautiful workmanship one saw everywhere. Small outdoor lights had been placed near some of the benches and they made a soft

silvery glow amid the hanging gold leaf of the foliage. It was the bitter-sweet time of autumn.

It was strange to see her smoking. She never did in her office, even though there was no rule against it. Now her still-pretty, finely modeled features were seen through a floating, falling scrim of cigarette smoke in an aura of partly shaded, partly glaring lamplight. She wore a thin off-white gown that reminded me of a moth's chrysalis. She had been talking for a while about her early days on the island, and I had the impression it was a way for her to obliquely come to grips with a question that had been bothering her for a while, but which she had no answer to, which was why exactly was I there? And who, if anyone, had sent me. She had been worrying these issues over in her mind for some time, and now they were given a metaphorical exploration in a meandering narrative about her own early days. She paused and drew on her cigarette, blowing smoke out in a steady plume past the light green curtain that framed the window.

"Did you vote on my money issue? it was scheduled, right?"

"Yes." Her shoulder jerked slightly when she spoke. "And yes, we did."

"You did?"

"Yes. I voted in support of your request, if that's what you're wondering."

"I wasn't going to ask."

"Yes," she said and blew smoke past the window again, looking up to the ceiling as she did. "Yes, I voted in your favor."

"Well thank you," I said.

"Well of course," she said and turned her face toward me with her eyes closed, the lids fluttering, tilting her forehead a bit. It was as if her face was taking a bow.

"So you're not thinking of going back?" she asked after a brief pause.

"No."

"Moving into Taipei?"

“No.”

“Are you looking for a new job?”

“No. Why are you asking me this?”

“Well, the tenure process is a bit different here. And so, you have to be prepared for that. I just want you to realize that. This is your second year. The decision comes in the third.”

“I was wondering also about the pension. I can’t stay if I don’t have that.”

“I don’t know why you wouldn’t. I do. So does Gretchen and Simon also. Who are you talking to about this, anyone?”

“Lu is helping me.”

“Lu,” she sniffed and blew more smoke, this time from the corner of her mouth that she made into an upturned spigot, the plume going into the light and making it cloudy. Then using her other hand as a rather manic flapper she shooed some of the smoke toward the window.

“Why this reaction?” I asked.

“Oh nothing. He’s fine, if you trust him. Do you? He has all sorts of real estate connections. He’s a money guy, that’s true. So yeah, maybe he’s the person. He’s money. I’m theatre.”

“I was at a rehearsal the other day.”

“Oh really?”

I went on to explain what I had seen. She seemed only vaguely interested and to be thinking of something. “They’re kind of a rival to my different groups,” she said, as though coming back from elsewhere. “But yes, they’re interesting. How did you get into their rehearsal?”

“Well, I know the writer who’s writing the script for the piece.”

“Who’s that?”

I told her. “Do you know her?” I said.

“No, but I know who she is. How did you meet her?”

I don't actually remember what I said, except that it was something diplomatically vague. At any rate, it was enough to satisfy her for the time being, since she let the matter drop, only then to take up another.

"So but now how's your health doing?"

"My health?"

"Yes, well, you know I was assuming that there must be something that was wrong."

"But why?"

Her hands had been clasped in a loose knot in her lap and now she made two large half loops at once, elbows jutting. "Well, we've been hearing about all these cancelled classes, missed classes…"

"I do have problems with sleep, that's true. Insomnia."

"Have you always?"

"Yes, but –

"Much worse now," she volunteered.

"Yes. I suppose."

"Are you seeing a doctor?"

"Yes, at Tai Da."

"Tai Da? You used to go to someone here, isn't that right? or is it someone else now? Taipei?" I had just enough time to wonder when I had told her this, but evidently, I must have at some point. "Yes, that's right. There was a doctor here before, but now I switched to someone there, yes."

Oh, I see. Stay in town," she suddenly said. "I just have this feeling that you're thinking of moving into Taipei."

"'Everyone likes Taipei,' Lu always says," I put in as a way of lightening the mood. "Uh, Lu," she said. Then went on, "And your problems with missing classes and all of that –none of this looks good. "And whatever else," she added cryptically. I had to wonder what she meant when she said this.

"And how is your Chinese coming?" she added, smiling in a somewhat teasing way, shaking the tip of her nose. "Still with that woman? where did you get her?"

"It's coming," I said, and attempted to return the pleasantry. "Yes, I'm still with her. She was recommended by a student."

"I thought you might have got a new one with all the coming and going in your office."

"No."

"You see her at your apartment?"

"Sometimes there, sometimes at the office. Why?"

"I was just wondering. It might not be good to be seen getting too intimate – "

"Intimate?"

"Well, you know, personal."

I was silent at this.

"I mean I'm only trying to prevent you from making mistakes that might hurt your chances."

"Yes, I understand," I said.

"That's really it."

For some reason that I would later reflect on, the thought occurred to me to ask about Dr. Gretchen. Of course, Lu had already mentioned her, and perhaps that's what put it in my head. But at the mention of her name, Kate's expression changed. It was a slight change, but I couldn't help noticing.

"Do you know where she is?" I said.

"No, not really. Someplace in Eastern Europe probably. She studies those languages, you know, so…she has to keep up."

"When's she coming back?"

"Don't know. Probably in a couple weeks. But I really don't know."

She lit another cigarette and blew smoke again up into the light, but this time with a raising of her chest which I took as a prelude to standing up

which in turn I took as a gesture of seeing me to the door. And so, after a certain number of pleasantries and small talk I got up to leave.

In the doorway she extended her arm and grasped my hand and gave it a squeeze. And then she completely surprised me by throwing both arms around my shoulders as though I were a bail of something and she was putting a tape measure around me. She held on for a couple seconds and gave me an extra squeeze. Then she let me go. Then she clasped my hand again and gave it a shake. “Ok. Good luck,” she said.

“Thank you,” I said and with a slight bow that I had maybe picked up from D., I retired into the hall and let her close the door on me.

I made my way back down the way I had come. As I went along, I couldn’t help but wonder which one was telling me the truth, Lu or Kate. Then, perhaps anticipating more insomnia, I decided to turn off onto a side road that led into the campus itself. I walked along a ways and then after a while I took another narrower path that I knew led to the campus’ ornamental pond. The tree boughs were low and heavy and with their deep shadows they made gates or doorways that one stepped through. There were tiers of stone steps that circled the pond. The pond was a battered onyx mirror shining with rippled fragments of a white moon. Leaves of dim amber floated on the surface. Above the pond, silhouetted in moonlight, was a dark structure one might have mistaken for a temple of some kind, but it was actually an old dormitory that was no longer used. It was a barracks-like building that was now derelict, with windows and doors missing. It sat on its hill just beyond the pond, and in the darkness it seemed to be keeping a kind of watch.

Then a man stepped out of a tree nearby. There was a broken stripe across his face and white shirt that was lilac colored in the strange light. It was Simon, the professor from Australia.

“Hey mate, what you doing here? Everything all right?”

“Just taking a walk, Simon. How are you?”

“I’m all right.”

“Heard you were leaving, going home.”

“Yep, I am,” he said, rubbing one thick forearm with the stubby fingers of his other hand. He was a forthright guy with little small talk, but when he did engage in it he made it count. I couldn’t help but ask about the financial question that preoccupied me. “Oh, that’s an old story,” he said, “Yes, I have that. So do the others. I believe you should be able to as well. But yes, there are some here that don’t like the idea of having foreigners around permanently.”

“Hmm yes. But to what extent?”

“But can you blame them?” he went on. “In my view, it’s different foreign powers.”

“You’re being diplomatic.”

“No no no – it’s not just the US, not at all. And Australia’s right in there, and others. But that’s it – the place is nothing to them. It’s just a tool, a pawn in a game.”

“Yes,” I said. “But the people, the ordinary people…”

“They’re great, they’re amazing,” he said wagging his head side to side. “Take my wife, for instance,” he said and laughed.

“Yes, and they’ve been through –”

“Terrible stuff. But they’re tough. And still so friendly.”

“Yes. But then there’s a difference,” I ventured.

“Yes yes, the intellectuals, the academics…. Well, they’re the ones who know –”

“Yes.”

“Who know what happened, who know the parties responsible. Well,” he said after a moment. “Anyway… well it’s good to see you.” And we shook hands and I saw him disappear into the thick shadows some ways down the path as though into a tunnel.

CHAPTER 9

When I didn't see her, I missed her. But sometimes I had the feeling that I was being fitted into the crannies of her busy schedule, for as much as I was busy, my schedule was very fixed. She, on the other hand, was entirely the opposite, since her work forced her to be always on the move, pursuing information, driving all around town – to interview one person or another, or to meet with editors, or with other journalists, or with academics, and sometimes with the members of the various political parties who combined, split up and recombined, in the complex and secret processes of Taiwanese politics. And then there was the task that was closest to her, the imagined stories – careful, detailed – that she worked on at night, alone, after she had done everything else. They were always stories that she had originally reported on, and which appealed to her sense of justice, of the need to draw attention to abuses and crimes. She wrote the imagined accounts of these problems, at times these tragedies, but also the stories of victory against evil, and of humor and laughter, pouring into them her mind and soul and publishing them in journals (and of course she wrote poetry – in secret). She had been offered a book contract for one – an account of the democratic revolution in which she'd played a role – but she turned it down. She didn't think she could do justice to the event, which had changed the country.

But eventually she came back to me. As, in fact, she always did.

It was a Vietnamese restaurant. "One of my favorites," she said, and gave me the same smile, as she looked around – its nearly amber light, walls

in a dark wood paneling, traditional Vietnamese music at a low volume. After settling herself and ordering some wine, something unusual for her, she began talking about her work, the part of it that bordered on the political situation. There were times before when she had been like this with me, and then there were always passages of an artful vagueness, a calculated indirectness, a careful omission. Over the past months I had been having some dim intimations of what was involved in the things she was dealing with, and I had become more and more uneasy. Was it an absurd illusion? the feeling I had originally been so possessed by – the sense of having come to a place, if not better than the one I had left, then at least in some ways more normal, where life could be more natural, or less distorted by factors that I could see had damaged so many things – lives – in that place I had come from, and where I myself had been worn down by isolation, by the fears that possessed me at odd times and the insomnia that would not leave me, that had in a way pursued me, and which now seemed increased rather than diminished, as though it were a curse from that other realm, this despite all the drugs given to me by physicians, those doctors called doctors of the soul, drugs on which I had gradually become dependent. Was my soul disordered in this place too somehow? this place so different from that other I had come from? And whose people had been dragged across long ages and then entangled with each other by what seemed a fated history, one in which I too was now entangled, so that it was these lines, these knots and snares, that I felt tightening through me, inside me. It was all this that I felt so strangely, sitting across from her – basking as I was in the warmth of her continuous smile, at times quite beaming, at others more restrained, more discrete to use one of her own favorite words. “I am too discrete for that,” she had written when I asked her for a clearer picture of herself, back when we were still communicating on the site. “What?” she suddenly asked, tilting her head to the side in that way she had. “Is there something wrong?” At first I didn’t know how to answer. There were many things wrong. And yet how beautiful she looked. She wore

a loose-fitting blouse – of a soft material and light beige in color, with a scarf equally soft and light green, wrapped around her waist, serving as a belt, a pair of dressy jeans, and black open-toed shoes. “No, nothing,” I said. There was the little smile again, and this time an index finger placed briefly against her cheek. Then with the same hand she stroked the stem of the wine glass in front of her before lifting it to her lips. It was a red wine that shone darkly in the light.

“Maybe I’ll ask my friend James for you – about the insomnia. He’s an American like you. But he’s married to a Taiwanese woman. He’s been here for a number of years. He studies Chinese medicine.”

“I see.”

“Maybe that could help you. His Mandarin is so good…sometimes I think it’s better than mine,” she said and laughed. “What do you think you’d like to eat. We can share again, you know. Like last time.”

Then she gathered her arms to herself for a second and tightened the loose-fitting belt. “Does it seem cold in here?” she said and shrugged up her shoulders a bit. “No,” I said. I was skeptical of her motive. I had the feeling that she just wanted me to look at her. She glanced at me and in her smile there was a slight glimmer as though there was a joke she expected me to catch onto. Her mouth, though normally small, narrow, almost rosebud-like in repose, blossomed out beaming in a remarkably sweet way when she smiled, which she so often did. It was a smile that I had come to know and to love – but in fact it had many variants, many shadings. She could draw on so many grace notes to inflect the melody that it was, but it was a smile whose basic quality was one of good-natured and genial sharing. It was the smile of a person who loved, who appreciated, who was taken almost out of herself by anything that was beautiful, exciting, sensuously attractive, or indeed just simply alive. She was not merely a sensualist, though she absolutely was; but more than that she was a great appreciator of life itself – and after that of any of the beautiful and alluring patterns, impressions, and shapes that the artistic spirit created. And I began to see something, to

glimpse something about the unnamed searching that we now both knew about. I began to know more completely what she was. Dinner had come and by then I had drunk several glasses of wine.

“You like to drink a lot sometimes.” She said this in a friendly matter-of-fact way, but it had been an issue between us for a while. “Sometimes. A little,” I said. She blinked and smiled and shrugged her shoulders again. I knew she must have been recalling the scene in the hotel room, but neither of us said anything.

“I’m having a lot of issues at the college.”

Her eyes widened and she looked troubled for a moment. And then in another instant she brightened, and I wondered what this meant.

“Really?” she said.

“Yes. And it’s very confusing.”

“In what way?”

“In what way confusing?”

“No, I mean what kind of issues?”

“Things having to do with money.”

“Mmm,” she acknowledged. “That’s always a problem.” Her attention seemed to wander a bit and she looked around the room as though she were searching for someone and wondering why they hadn’t appeared. The crème-colored candle on the table flickered and her slim fair hand moved through the half circle of light and she brushed some dark strands away from her brow.

“So is anyone helping you with all this?”

“Well, there’s an American woman. She’s been there quite a while,” I said, and I mentioned Kate’s name. A different expression came to her face and then was gone. She passed her hand through the candlelight again then adjusted the loose fabric of her blouse away from her throat.

“Do you know her?”

“No,” she said after a moment, as though having searched memory.

“Do you know a Prof. Linn?” she asked.

“Yes, he’s incredibly hostile. He actually scowls at me when he sees me in the hallway.”

“Really?”

“Yes, it’s crazy. Do you know him?”

“Yes, somewhat. He was one of my teachers when I was in grad school. Briefly. I didn’t finish.”

“Yes, you told me.”

“I had to get out. I had to do things.”

“Yes, I know,” I said, and took her hand. It was soft and slight. And she gave my hand a little squeeze back.

“Well if you’re not happy there, maybe you can switch to a place here in Taipei.”

“How would I do that?”

“It might be possible. I can ask around.”

“Ask who?”

“It might be possible. Let’s not talk about it now. But what about moving here anyway?”

“Move here while I’m still teaching there?”

“Yes, well – yes,” she said and looked at me in a certain way, as though she were displaying her face for me in the candlelight.

“Then I’d have to commute back and forth.”

“Well you’re doing it anyway.”

“That would be different though,”

“How?”

“Well, it just would be. They seem not to like that. They seem to practically live in their offices. One of them, the other American – another woman, older – shortly after I got there, she said ‘we stay late in our offices to work’ – kind of smug, you know, as though announcing what was expected.”

“Do you think they’re nosy?” she asked. The question surprised me a little and I hesitated.

“Yes. They seem to know what I’m doing, where I’m going, who I’m with…”

“Really?”

“Yes. Or at least to be curious about it.”

“Well then that’s a reason to be away from them.”

“It might not be good. I don’t know…”

“We could see each other more.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Well don’t you want that?”

“Of course, yes. Silly. Why do you ask such silly questions?”

“Well isn’t that important?”

“I said yes. What’s wrong?”

“Never mind. Forget about what I said maybe – ok?” She seemed to be holding something back, and it almost looked like she was going to cry. “When I said that you were what I had been waiting for my whole life. And that I’d finally found you. That you couldn’t imagine how happy I was. All of that that I wrote. Maybe you don’t remember.”

“Yes of course I do. What’s wrong all of a sudden?”

She looked down at her plate, and then around the room. “If you don’t want to develop our relationship further and what I told you in my email, stupidly I guess…” She looked at the table and put three fingers to the side of her brow. “– that you’re …never mind. So we can just keep things like this,” she said and looked up at me.

“Like what?”

“You know…casual.”

“I don’t think of it that way.”

“Well, that’s how it seems.” Without looking at me, she folded her napkin and put it to the side of her plate and adjusted herself in her chair. “If you’re not willing to go further. That’s fine,” she said with a minimal wry smile as though she had finally solved some small but stubborn problem. And with that she got up and left.

For two days I tried to call her but got only her voice mail. I didn't feel like leaving any message. Email also went unanswered. On the third day I was beginning to be worried. Had something happened? Then late that night, as I lay there trying to sleep, unable to sleep, staring up into the darkness which seethed with tiny points, she called, asking me how I was, and saying she wanted to see me. "When?" I asked. "Now," she said.

"It's late. I don't think there are any busses."

"I'll come and get you."

"All right."

The darkness in her bedroom held a faint tincture of moonlight, where she slept on two mattresses on the wooden floor in a three-story house that was like a western house, and where the blinds of the windows near her bed were faintly gilt with the night's silver. Her thin nightgown was pale and beautifully disordered around her, as though she were a figure rising up through dark water, and it was the foam of the waves and ripples of her appearing. And my hands came parting aside the sheer wrappings of a precious gift. And she was still as though to reveal and to invite. There was, in the pale ivory and dark, a Y, and at one of its points a delicate medallion, and then downward to the top of her belly and then upward again to the opposite point, and another pale medallion, bud-like and soft, and then down and pausing a moment to feel through my parted lips her heart beating there, and her breathing, and then down further and further still to a lovely dark triangle, and she opened her mouth, and my fingers moving over her face felt for her parted lips, and she opened her mouth wider still. After a while we slept. In my dream there were hands in the dark displaying a book to me, turning over its pages, but there was a voice telling me that it was the wrong book. Toward early morning I woke, and lying on my side I saw a sail moving away past what seemed like a rough jagged shore, and in the sail there was a crooked mast, like the dark vein in the translucent body of a shrimp. And then I saw that it was part of her nightgown that she had

pulled up around herself like a tent and within which she was reading with a small flashlight.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m reading.”

I moved closer to her, holding her around the waist and looking over her shoulder. She was propped on one elbow. Her tilted flashlight made an egg of light across the book’s pages. It was in Chinese. There were bookshelves along the walls of the room, books in English, Chinese, French, and Japanese.

“What’s it about?”

“It’s about the conditions of the native people up in the hills. They have many problems. But also so much talent. So many of the popular singers in Taiwan are from them.”

“Yes, I know. I thought that was interesting.”

“Yes. It’s incredible really – their voices, they get together and sing in a group…but many problems too. Very poor. And alcohol.”

“Yes….”

“Yes, terrible. Need to try to write something about it. I’ve been to so many places. Always so many problems. I went to Egypt. To write about the situation of the women there. What they do to the little girls. So awful.”

“Yes, I know.”

“You would never do that to a little girl.”

“You’re my little girl.”

“Ok,” she said and pressed her head back against my nose.

“Ok?’ I said.

“Yes, ok.”

“But I always have to be working.” I drew her closer to me and cupped one of her breasts in my hand. “You can’t do everything,” I said into her ear. And I put my lips against her cheek.

“I have to do everything. I was in Argentina. Writing about the families of the people who were disappeared. It was hard to get there too.”

“Why?”

“They make it hard for us. To have our passports recognized. Like we are not a real country. Hard for a visa. All kinds of trouble. A Catholic priest there had to help me.”

“Why a Catholic priest?”

“I don’t know. They wanted me to write about it. They had some kind of influence. I can’t even remember it all, so complicated. I was in Prague. That was so beautiful. I was in Poland – that was fun. A theatre conference in Warsaw. They are such intense people, so intellectual. And I had an… encounter there,” she added.

“I see,” I said

“Yes.”

“Trying to make me jealous.”

“No.” Then she went on. “He was amazing.’

“Still trying to make me jealous.”

“No. It was a long time ago. I want Taiwan to be like that. Full of intellectual people.”

“I think it’s like that already.”

“We have to have our own culture. Our own place.”

I drew her to me more and pushed the book to the side and she let her flashlight drop and our faces were together. In the half-dark of early morning, I was holding her head framed in my two arms. Her eyes were closed. She seemed to be listening for something far away.

Later that day, in the afternoon, it was raining and windy. She drove me to the bus station and waited, standing there – the door of her car open, she standing inside of it, her umbrella blown to the side – and she had a troubled expression for a moment, and then she smiled, waving, as I boarded the bus to go back.

CHAPTER 10

I must acknowledge that D. was often the person I turned to when I needed help with something unusual, in this case moving, and out of her extreme good heartedness she would always come through for me. So she found a decent local moving company, and we were able to make the arrangements. I think she was somewhat disappointed when I told her of my decision to move. The provincial town where we were was somewhat dull, and it seemed to me that everything I sought in Taiwan was in Taipei.

“Why do you want to move for? You have everything here, Taipei very expense.” Sometimes I visited D at her tiny apartment on the third floor of an old brick building near the train station. We were sitting together at the low wooden table where we had our lessons – it was a square table of varnished wood that was about a foot high, and one sat of cushions that had been placed on a small carpet – D had given me a special brown vinyl-covered cushion used by some Buddhists for meditation – and she would

give practical advice or offer to help in this way or that. She sat in her quiet and composed way. She tilted her head away from me, as though inclining her ear to an invisible child beside her, and got a thoughtful expression, sliding her eyes as though toward the upper corner of the room then back toward me. “Maybe you should go to the Chinese medicine doctor. For your sleep. You know?”

“Hmm,” I said. I was not enthusiastic about Chinese medicine doctors. In Taiwan for some reason it seemed that one seldom encountered acupuncturists, instead everything was done with herbal medicine, as well as therapeutic massage and spinal manipulation. “It is very health, you know.”

“Healthy?”

“Yes. It can really help. My auntie” – D seemed to have any number of “aunties” – “knows a famous doctor in Taipei, Chen I-shun. He can really help. You want me make an appointment?”

“Hmm. I don’t know, we’ll see.”

“It will help,” she said with a little downward tap of her chin, as though settling the matter.

“I think I’ll move to Taipei anyway,” I said.

“Mmm, no. I don’t think that’s good. Here is more natural, there is too much noise, traffic, dirty. You get worse. I think. Stress.”

“I don’t like having to go back and forth so much. We can still continue our lessons. I still have to be here to teach my classes.”

“Hen ma fen.” (a lot of trouble)

“Not really. There is the train. And buses.”

“Bus better than train.” She was silent as she sipped more of the special tea she had made for me called “high mountain.

And so on a particular day I left. The moving company showed up in the morning and they loaded my furniture into a dark blue open bed pickup truck, threw a canvas tarpaulin over it all and met me at the entrance of my

new apartment building in Shuang Lien, an older neighborhood on the city's south side. It was a darkly overcast day toward the beginning of the winter, a small cold steady rain. The elderly couple who owned the building let me in. D. was with me. She had found the place for me, a tip from one of her friends who was a realtor. I needed to have her there anyway, since the couple, both in their 70s, did not speak Mandarin, but only Taiwanese, and since she was actually raised speaking it, she had to interpret.

After everything was settled, I was left alone in this new place, in the middle of the unknown city, where, other than Mei-Hwa, I knew not one single person. An eerie feeling accompanied me as I walked silently from room to room. It was a place that would never really become a home, just as the city itself would not, in which the transformation that I was somehow seeking would not really be able to take place, although I didn't know this at the time. The apartment was across from a traditional market that ran several blocks. There were at least four temples – some Buddhist some Taoist – within a few city blocks and crowds of several hundred people routinely crowded into the market stalls where they found tiny salt fish, pork feet, dofu, squid, live chickens, dead chickens, saffron, chili peppers, *chun juen* which is a sort of Thai peanut burrito, apples, pears, green tea, oolong tea, tea loose in cans, tea pressed into small wheels, onions, garlic, green peppers, orange and yellow peppers, bananas, beads, *neiyo bing*, more dofu…. I could look out onto the paved concourses that led into the subway station. They were made of intricate mosaic-like patterns of stones in swirling designs and there were stone benches under the trees. In the street right below my window there would often be a group of local unemployed men – bums some might say – who would collect cast-off cardboard boxes from the markets and sell them to a scrap monger who would pay them a few cents apiece and they would use that to buy small bottles of the fearful *mi jiuo*, a rice wine of about 20 proof, and get drunk underneath my window and then sing Taiwanese folk songs in loud quailing theatrical voices and then sometimes practice their Tai Chi forms,

stumbling in the middle of them now and then. They wore white tea shirts and work pants or sometimes shorts and plastic sandals in no matter the weather and when they sobered up, they would sit on the benches, quietly smoking and talking, or loudly talking, gesturing in the way that they always did – the Taiwanese talk with their hands as much as the Italians – and arguing.

I read somewhere that Taipei used to be called Little Paris. I had never been to Paris, but I found the idea intriguing. Perhaps it had to do with the large stretches of grass and trees that divided some of the boulevards, as when you went down the Dun Hua South Road to where it intersected the Ba De Lu, where there were wrought iron benches among the trees and rows of flowers; or maybe it had to do with the small courtyards that you would come upon as you walked through some of the old neighborhoods, with their apartment buildings made of stone or brick and in the middle of them a small spot with trees planted and stone benches among them, and you could see the backs of all the apartments, their back porches with laundry hanging on bamboo poles suspended from the porch ceiling, sometimes at several different heights, like a musical staff, and a tall hook leaning against the wall near the door that would be used to lift clothing up onto the highest poles or take them down once they were dry; and the back walls of the buildings that might be of concrete often had water marks down them, and some of the these were like the color of a bamboo leaf after it’s been steamed; and as one sat there the sounds of the street a block away would seem slightly delayed and mingled with the sounds of dinner being prepared or of talking or the sounds of children playing; was this, too, Paris? or perhaps it had to do with the large silver water tanks that apartments had on their roofs, where people had whole gardens, usually combining vegetables and flowers, and around them might be stone troughs of more flowers; was this like Paris? or was it the vendors with their carts in the arcades leading into the subway near the Tai Ji station, who in the winter months with their cold rain and fog would sell you

paper bags of roasted chestnuts, or the crème cake vendors with their blue carts on the top of which they had a griddle where they made *nei yo bing* creme cakes the size of half dollars, golden, still warm with vanilla creme inside, or perhaps it was the rain itself – the plum rains in the early spring as the coldest months begin to warm a little – cool clear driving rains or else the cold bright sometimes frigid rains of the winter months or the torrents of the tropical storms sometimes mounting to actual typhoons, but these came mostly to the south, and in Taipei itself we got the rainy remnants that would bend the betel nut trees beneath waves of gray-white spray blurring the tree tops and making the undersides flash so that they looked like fish bones. Was any of this Paris? But it was Taipei.

Mei-Hwa called the next day and invited me to her place. “You didn’t think I was going to let you stay there by yourself, did you? Or maybe you’re not by yourself. Hmm? So what’s her name? You like her better than me?” And then a high-pitched giggle.

“Come on,” I said.

“Where’m I going? You come on. Ok? Bring your work if you want, ok? I can drive you into the station when you have to teach.” So I agreed. And we spent some time together at her place in Hsin Dien, in the far southeast of the city.

I remember many things, so many that it’s difficult to summon all of them, and yet there is one that I remember most. That which in principle defies description, must then be described many times and in many ways: a slightly crooked mouth, wide and with a strangely zig zag smile; beautifully shaped lips, a narrow mouth that was a rose bud in repose, but broad and beaming when she smiled, and then a slightly crooked grin lingered somewhere in it, but in an endearing way, as though a mischievous child were hiding inside a beautiful woman; there was a small freckle-like beauty mark at the edge of her mouth; rounded eyes with full lids; a small delicate nose that seemed to crinkle up at times; her pale delicate nipples; her fair

skin, very soft and fair; small feet and hands; hands that grasped in a slightly splayed out way like a child; small almost mincing steps, yet purposeful, like a minimal careful march, a slightly flat-footed step, like someone walking carefully on ice or snow; she did not swing her arms freely but kept them close to her sides or her front, and she was in fact often carrying something – a notebook, a camera, a recorder; the walk and manner of a professional observer who knew how to make herself as inconspicuous as possible; but this contrasted at times with her glamorous clothes and jewelry; sometimes they were designer jeans with expensive pointed-toed pumps, or most times ordinary jeans with worn tennis shoes or hiking boots; later, after the first winter there, her thick but soft black hair was done in tight waves that streamed out from a center parting down to the top of her shoulders and to her shoulder blades behind; a rounded graceful face – the cheek bones not prominent but quite high as sometimes seen in the Mongolians, and she claimed that her ancestors on her father's side had been officials on the silk road; a very slender slight neck, and sometimes she gathered her hair up in a sort of loose bouquet behind her ears, and little strands would hang down against the sides of her neck; she drove with both hands on the steering wheel as though directing it with the palms of her hands, but she often gestured with her right hand to make a point or to change the radio, or the volume of the music, or to ask me to get something for her from the glove compartment – lip balm, a scrunchy for her hair, a pen; the tilt of her head to the side with an inquiring glimmer in her eye, the upper lip drawn down a bit, and sometimes she just drew her upper lip and the edges of her nose down slightly and gave them both a little shake as though one should say "and so?", "really? no."; sometimes, lips pursed, and with the oval shape of her face, her cheeks surprisingly full, her narrowed eyes like almond slivers – it all gave her face a lunar cast, of a sort seen in some traditional Japanese masks; her eyes were entirely black yet subtly vibrant, and they searched your face in a kind of arc-like pattern as though searching for small specks of truth or untruth, then she would

smile and the broadness of her smile, its tilted crookedness, its funny jaggedness and the small beauty mark on her upper lip were so endearing and lively and welcoming, and then it was no longer a face drawn from classical Japanese art in a mysterious repose but was friendly and open and showing her imperfect teeth; her upper front teeth had been somehow damaged in her youth – “they got pretty messed up” she said at our first dinner date, her gaze dropping down for a second, then glancing away toward the apricot lights along the bridge and the dim white swan boats that seemed suspended strangely still on the silent river, a silence in which the occasional laughter of the couples was startlingly clear; I wondered about this – her damaged front teeth – for she seemed to come from a rather affluent background, and I wondered how such a person would have that sort of problem; her fingers were slim, slight, and not long; but the thumbs were oddly prominent, and I remembered reading somewhere that people with this feature will tend to be those who achieve their goals, and I remember thinking that this was apt; her forearms were slender and did not suggest much physical activity, though in fact she was a good swimmer and swam all the time at the public pool that was near her apartment, and during the first months of our knowing each other she would often show up late at my place with her hair still wet from the swimming pool and with a white towel wrapped turban-like around it; her upper arms were slim and soft with only very slight biceps and no deltoids at all, a narrowness and slenderness to her shoulders as well; yet she moved with a purposeful quality – careful but bold, and, with her prominent hairstyle, and sometimes with her glamorous clothes, she seemed to take up more space in a room than she possibly could have, and I was always startled at the smallness and slightness of her frame when I took her in my arms or when I carried her naked into the bedroom; despite being so forthright and assertive in her working life, she was often very passive in bed, lying there in the dim light of my room with an almost dreamy drunken look in her eyes, and she gazed at me then in a wondering and abstracted way, as though she really didn’t

know what was happening and was waiting for me to tell her the secret, to speak the unknown magic and long-awaited word that would let her know what this was: what are we? she seemed to be saying, not what are we doing but rather what are we at all, and then too – where? where are we? where are we going? “Stevie…Stevie,” she would seem to be saying, using the diminutive form of my name, which only she and one other ever had used, and by which she would always call me when she wanted a special and child-like intimacy to arise between us – Stevie, she would whisper at those moments; and then at other times, she was not passive at all, but as though coming out of her trance, would help herself in the way that she needed to, because, yes, it was true that she could not complete the rhythm in which she was by then caught, could not reach the crest of the wave that by then had lifted her part way up but which was threatening to flow out beneath her unless she could touch it directly, as though feeling its power within her, taking it in her own hands, cooperating and yet directing, giving up, giving in, and yet regaining her own sovereignty even as she let herself be pushed more deeply, cooperating with my insistence, meeting it and meeting herself as well in some sense, giving me her dreamy look and then her expectant dawning half smile, and then her mouth was open in deep exclamation as she looked away toward the wall or into the pillow, as I cradled her head with my forearms and kissed her cheek, and my heart was torn by the deepest tenderness toward her, even as I was lifted and set down in the same wave of completion; she would stand sometimes with her feet slightly pigeon-toed her knees pointing inward a bit. this was only when she was without her clothes; all sorts of little elastic bands, some like stretchy laces, others with crinoline folds and frills, these for her hair or sometimes just around her wrist; light brown or beige pants like painter’s pants with loose pockets at the hips, sometimes pink tennis shoes with white laces; sometimes a shirt with no bra underneath; her breasts were set low on her chest, the nipples like little crinkles in the fabric, or the suggestion of a point now and then in the cloth as she moved, like the soft

points a gentle rain will raise on water; her nipples, of just under medium size, were very fair, the lightest possible pink; her arms were slim and soft, and her elbows pointed outward a bit when she was moving about in a hurry; sometimes a quick wave of her hand like flicking her little finger, and when she did this her chin lowered slightly; she would tighten her nose, then shiver it slightly, emphasizing her point with a downward clip of her chin, sometimes the downward clip would be stilled, and it was as if she were holding a small object, an egg say, between her chin and throat; the inoculation dimple in the pale skin of her shoulder; her right hand in my left, our fingers interlaced firmly, as we sat in the hospital room; black eyes like drops of coffee, a question always arising in them, an unspoken question becoming a smile, a movement of her gaze, as though scanning; the way she piled her hair at the back of her head, fastening it with a band, just as she climbed on top of me – a utilitarian, almost business-like gesture on her face briefly, an expression that seemed to say that she'd done this many times before, with many others; she shivered against the noise of a child screaming in the restaurant, squeezing her shoulders inward, pulling her arms in to her sides; she would come from the shower wrapped in towels, her body and her hair, and lie in bed beside me that way, drying herself more fully while in bed, perhaps waiting for me to draw them away like the wraps from a steamed bun, and I drew away the wraps and would lick off the droplets of steam and I would savor the soft white steamed bread with its smooth surface, its slight glaze, these called *mahn toh* – some white and made with sugar, sweet *mahn toh*, *tien de mahn toh*. *Mahn toh* became our secret private word for her body, the different parts of it, that I loved so much – *da da de mahn toh*: big *mahn toh* were the two soft loaves of her rear end, as I placed my hands there, cupping them to me; *jong jong de mahn toh* – medium sized *mahn toh* – her two breasts, and I would place my two cupped hands over them; and then *shiao shiao de mahn toh* – little little *mahn toh*, which were the full lobes of her eyelids, so fair and soft, as I placed my fingertips gently on them, tracing, and then we would both laugh,

and this was a game that we played, and sometimes when she wanted to be childlike, and perhaps slightly mischievous, she would say in a little girl's manner – "tell me the *mahn toh*", and I would comply – *da da de mahn toh*, clapping softly her rear end*, jong jong de mahn toh*, tracing her two breasts, and then *shiao shiao de mahn toh* – brushing her eyelids, and we would both laugh and I would hug her to me.

At times she left things behind at my apartment, but secretly, without telling me. For some times when she stayed overnight, we would not sleep together in my bedroom, because I had such extreme insomnia that it was better for me to be alone, and at those times she slept in the other bedroom. There was no bed in there, there was nothing in there, in fact, because I had few possessions. The apartment was entirely too large, so I had an extra room in which there was nothing. It had the same institutional off-white for the walls, the same blinds of waxen yellow. But in the whole room there was nothing but the placards of sunlight, if the blinds were up, or, if closed, a serrated *gradus* of light from the same blinds. On those nights she camped out in the other room, sleeping on some blankets doubled up on the floor. She was the veteran of many tough journalistic assignments, so this was really nothing to her. When she did this, she left early in the morning and I would get up later, hung over from my sleeping pills, and I would find her gone and I would sometimes wander into that room and consider the small encampment she'd left behind. It may have been out of a sense of loneliness that my anxiety would come over me again – the realization that I was alone in the large and unknown city, and I felt a kind of absolute lostness and an obscure sense of being in danger, and for this reason I took some sort of comfort in just standing there, looking at her things, as though I wanted to retrieve her presence.

But as I did this, I had to realize that though she was with me sometimes, she was not really with me. She might be an occasional visitor, camping out in a spare room, but one might almost have had the impression that she wanted to be a secret visitor who would come and go according to

her own customs and for her own reasons. In this way, she imposed a limit on any suggestion of domesticity. And indeed, she was not domestic; she was always in motion. I thought I knew the places where she was most likely travelling to and what she was going to be doing. But I learned later that there were many things I could not have anticipated, or even understood.

CHAPTER 11

As Mei-Hwa said, Brit was there at the station to pick me up. I remembered her from before when she and a few of Mei-Hwa's close friends had a little get together. I was invited, the only man in the group, which seemed to amuse them. She was fair like Mei-Hwa and her raven hair was cut in a near shoulder length page with rakish angles. She had high cheek bones and hollow cheeks. In a dim light it looked like she had sideburns. Her mouth was wide and striking, always coral lipstick setting off perfect and perfectly white teeth. It was a high voltage smile. She dressed with a casual but somewhat lethal stylishness and her figure was noticeable. Getting partway up from the driver's seat, she gave me a big wave as though she were reaching up to a high shelf.

"Hello," she breathed out as I got in. "I'm going to take you over there. Then have to go. How are you? And she touched my hand with the tips of her fingers. Nice to see you again. So you moved here I heard."

"Yes."

“That’s good, now you can see each other all the time, right?” And she touched my hand again. “You are getting very serious.”

“Well …we’ll see,” I said. She gave me a brief glance.

Then she was staring ahead, her sunglasses hiding her eyes, a faint blush of rouge on her cheeks, a loose knit blouse, no bra, tight fitting jeans and stiletto heels as we drove down the Zhong Shan North Road, past the Jian Tan station and the Shih Linn night market on the opposite side. A metro train was speeding by just then overhead and past us in an arc, like some sort of flying dragon in an old legend, windows bright and filled with staring faces, its aluminum cars dimming in the bluish dusk. “Most of the western men that come to Taiwan are real assholes,” she said all of a sudden.

“Really?”

“Yah. They used to be some salesperson, ya know, or this or that, and then they can’t make it in their own country anymore, so they come here.”

The trees were half in leaf and fluttered like light green screens filtering the peach-colored light of the sunset as the sun sank down somewhere behind China. She pursed her finely shaped lips –_“And teaching English, ya know, it’s not bad pay and hours. But most of them are real jerks.”

I didn’t say anything.

“You know? They call them cram schools. You know?”

“Yes,”

“So…but maybe sometimes can be ok if they get the right type of person. But just between you and me….” She touched my hand again. She had to steer, but then she put it back, this time on my arm.

“About Mei-Hwa. For a while she was very sick…either not eat or when she eat then, make herself throw…out?”

“Throw up.”

“Throw up, yes. You know about this type of thing?”

“Yes. She could have died maybe.”

“Yes. Yes, it was very bad. Had to be in hospital. I want you to know. Please please
please don’t tell her I said anything.”

“Don’t worry.”

“You know? And she tapped my hand with the edge of hers.”

“Yes.”

“I just want you to understand. About her, how she is. But please don’t tell her I say
anything.”

We were getting near the place, near the Tai Ji metro station, an area of older buildings, somewhat dark – wrought iron rails, stone the color of oxblood, and arcade-like streets. “I have to go and pick up some other people. Everyone is so *interested* to meet you.” And she gave my forearm a little shove and squeeze.

“Really?” I said

“Oh yeah,” she said. She wore a purple scarf around her neck, and her fair skin showed at her throat and the top of her chest. Her black hair was swept across her brow. It was elegant in the way that a fighter plane is.

She stopped the car near the building and I got out. She waved and drove off. I went into the lobby. A small cubicle-like elevator with a mesh-like rubber mat on its floor took me up several flights. It left me near the door of the Blue Note – a jazz bar run by a retired trumpeter who had once played with big names and who was called Tsai Ba, Papa Tsai. It was a small space with dark blue and black walls. On the walls were photos of famous jazz musicians, some of them posing with Tsai Ba, and reproductions of album covers. There were also pictures of Tsai Ba with his trumpet. There was an L-shaped bar to the right as you came in. On the opposite side was a band stand with a baby grand in front. In the middle were small tables. I lingered in the doorway for a moment then went in and took a seat at one of the tables. It was still a little early and there were only a few couples at different spots around the room. Tsai Ba and his wife were behind the bar.

They stayed at one of the L sides near the door to the kitchen, and a hired bar tender worked the other side. She went by the name Yellow, “Just Yellow,” she would say to me, after I got to know her a bit and tried to get her real name out of her. She was a professional bar tender who worked many different venues around the city and made quite a good living at it. She sometimes gave me some coaching in Chinese. “You have to speak more clearly,” she said, meaning my tones had to be more distinct, after I had had some difficulty communicating with Tsai Ba himself. After a few minutes two guys came in. I was the only foreigner in the place so they picked me out right off and came over. One was tall and thin. He was dressed in a dark brown sport coat and black pants with a black turtleneck. He had a courtly and friendly manner, bending forward and inclining his head, like a maître’d, as he spoke.

“Are you Mr. Steve?” he said.

“Yes,” I said. And I wondered if his formality was a bit of a joke.

“Ok,” he said raising both arms like tossing something with his wrists, as though to say *here, good.* The other stood behind him and to the side. He was shorter, broad shouldered, strong looking. I would learn later he was a well-known actor in the theatre and in some domestic films. He said nothing and sat down when the other did. His name was Tseng. I don’t think I ever knew his first name.

“I am a friend of Mei-Hwa,” the tall one said. Later he told me his name was Martin. “She told me a lot about you.”

“I see.”

“Yes,” he said, bowing forward in his seat. Then he spoke in quick Mandarin to his friend who answered in one word. “Hao,” he said in a low deep voice, so that it sounded like a growl.

“Well, we just want to make *sure* you got here ok.” On the word ‘sure’ he jiggled one hand palm out like adjusting a knob. “Did someone pick you up at the station?”

I told him.

“Oh yah.” He ducked his head in approval, “very interesting girl.” Then he chuckled a bit – “glamorous.”

“Yes, she is.”

During this time the other silently regarded me. He did not seem unfriendly, rather watchful and curious.

By then there were more people in the place, several sitting at both sides of the bar. Yellow was moving back and forth in front of the bar mirror and the reflected bottles. A raspberry-colored light bathed that side. The open kitchen door threw fluorescent light on the opposite. Cigarette smoke drifted, and the band – four young women from Osaka, a trio of saxophones and a piano – began their first set. My two companions had taken their leave, saying that the others would be there shortly, so I sat there by myself. I thought of getting a drink but then didn’t. They were playing some bebop standards. Then Mei-Hwa appeared. I hadn’t seen her come in. It was as if she materialized out of the light and smoke.

“How are you?” she said.

“I’m ok. And you?”

She squinted up her eyes and made a tap down with her chin. She was very happy about something but was keeping it all inside.

“I’ve missed you,” she said.

“I missed you too.” We reached our hands toward each other and held on for a moment. Then she gently drew hers back. “Not in public,” she said with an amused toss of her head.

“Ok.”

“I am in a new phase. A new life. That’s how I feel.”

“*Zhende ma?”* I said.

“*Zhen de,*” she said.

“Ok. In what way?”

“Because I have you now. Having you there almost all the time like that. Being with one person is a new thing for me. Especially someone who is perfect for me.”

“I’m not perfect.”

“You’re perfect for me.”

There were more people now. They had turned some special lights on the band stand and the saxophones gleamed gold. They were excellent players. They all wore white shirts and black pants. They bowed and swayed with the rhythm. The piano player looked down at the keyboard sweeping her forehead from side to side.

“I was very very depressed after my last relationship ended.”

“Yes, you said.”

“And then after a while I went wild.” We had ordered drinks, a stinger for her and Tsing Dao beer for me. We sipped our drinks. “I slept with 37 men in one year,” she said and tossed her head a bit, as though to dismiss.

I looked out across the room, trying to see who was related to whom and in what way just by how they sat or stood together or their expressions or their gestures.

“It was loneliness. And depression. I felt hollow. But also…I don’t know.” Her mood seemed different. What had been spiraling upward now was dipping down to earth. But then she rallied and gave me a big smile. Then a group arrived and came straight to our table. The one table was too small, so two were fitted together. We were eleven all together. Among them was a special friend Mei-Hwa had told me of, Pei-Wen, an elegant, reserved woman of medium height, more formally dressed than the others in a close fitting black suit and crimson scarf, and her companion, Stacy Huang, a smiling friendly person in a brown jacket and green tee shirt underneath and jeans. Martin played master of ceremonies and got everyone the various drinks they wanted, his lanky form threading carefully through the crowd to the bar and back several times.

“How long have you been here?” Martin said.

“This is my second year.”

“How you like it so far?”

“Not so much,” Martin said joking. “Must be very different for you.”

“Hard for you maybe,” Tseng said.

“It is different,” I said.

There was small, scattered laughter. Mei-Hwa was silent. Brit was already on her third drink. “Women different too, right?” she said. “You dating lots of beautiful Taiwan girl.”

“Not China girl, Taiwan girl,” Mei-Hwa said.

“That’s right,” Brit brayed out. “How you like?”

“I mostly just work all the time.” More laughter.

“Well,” Brit said, “that’s good, you’re serious guy, I can tell.”

“Serious guy for serious woman,” Martin said. “Do you know how famous she is?” He pointed across the two tables with an extended arm. “No, I’m not,” Mei-Hwa said and spread the fingers of both hands, whisking away the compliment.

I was seated next to Brit somehow. She kept pressing her knee against mine. Or sometimes her arm against mine, or she would lean her shoulder into me, or her face, and linger. It was all quite obvious, but she was drunk. Mei-Hwa was at an angle to us and had a clear view, but she diplomatically ignored it all.

“Will you go with her when she travels?” Brit said.

“She travels a lot,” Martin said.

“I guess it depends when,” I said.

“That would be great,” Mei-Hwa said, “I never thought of that.”

“Well, you cancelled your trip now.”

“Cancelled more than one,” Brit said.

“I couldn’t fit it in. So much trouble to arrange.” She turned to me. “I told you about all that.”

“Yes,” I said

“We have to get a better situation for Taiwan,” Mei-Hwa said. “Not just chips, computer, more chips…or vacation place.” She seemed inarticulate with some sort of frustration.

“No one thinks we are a vacation place,” Tseng said. He seemed to view this with a certain disdain.

“Well, I don’t want to speak too bluntly. Japanese businessman come here for you know what,” Brit said.

“Oh yeah,” Martin said.

“Uhm yes,” Pei-Wen said. “We have a problem with that.” It was the first time she spoke, her English entirely without accent. Stacy Huang nodded gravely. Then she gave me a brief grin.

“Have to legalize,” Brit said. “Have freedom, no control. Love illegal – crazy. Making love should be free.”

“Right,” Mei-Hwa said in all seriousness.

“Of course.”

Pei-Wen darted a glance at Brit. Mei-Hwa seemed wary of the direction of discussion.

“Do you know this professor at your place, Dr. Kate?” Brit asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Why?” Pei-Wen darted another fierce glance at her.

“Oh nothing. She used come around a lot. Theatre person.”

“Yes, we know her. A bit,” Tseng said. “Another American. Another troublemaker.”

Mei-Hwa seemed frozen and looked down at her drink then up, and it seemed that she and Pei-Wen were having a brief silent exchange in which somehow Pei-Wen had included me by a subtle glance. Then I wondered, in another moment, whether this was the case or if the glance had had a different meaning.

“Are you going to move here?” Martin inquired.

“He already did,” Mei-Hwa said with a note of triumph.

“We are thinking he can teach here.”

“Oh Tai Da.”

“Maybe a cram school,” Mei-Hwa said. There was laughter.

“I thought you were professor,” Tseng said. He was amused in an acid way, but this seemed to be habitual with him.

“I thought maybe he might consider,” Mei-Hwa said to my mild astonishment.

“Cram school is terrible,” Brit said, “teach for money, so much per course. You crazy,” she said to Mei Hwa, “teach little kids…?”

“You want me to teach at a cram school?” I asked.

“Well, if you’re not happy there, it would at least –” she broke off. I said nothing. And I recalled Brit’s comment earlier about such schools and their foreign-born teachers. And I had to wonder if she, or others, saw me in that sort of light.

Later we drove back to my place and neither of us said anything during the ride. She seemed to be preoccupied with something, and I let her stay with her own thoughts. I had the feeling she had the same impression of me. But then we arrived and as we walked in the door, she threw her green silk jacket down on the couch that ran along one wall and then went into the bathroom with the quick mincing walk she sometimes had, her forearms held close to her sides.

“Have to go,” she said. “Couldn’t when I was there.”

While she was gone, I sat on the couch and handled the jacket. The fabric was very smooth and soft, and I could smell her perfume. She didn’t wear perfume when she was working, and she was always working, but when she did, for some special occasion, she preferred heavy musk-like scents. Then I put the jacket down. She came back out. She gave me a little smile and toss of her head sideways, as though to say “Well? What?” But there was something disingenuous about it all, and I felt that she knew this and knew also what I had been thinking.

“Is something wrong?” she said, still feigning innocence.

“You want me to teach at a cram school?”

“Well, it was just an idea, a suggestion.” She sat down at the opposite end of the couch and gathered up her jacket, holding it against her front like a girl with a doll. I was silent.

“I just thought…you know…”

“No, what?”

“I just thought it would at least be a way you could get out of there. You know you’re not happy. And then you could be here all the time. And I could see you all the time. Instead of –”

“Instead of what?”

“The way it is now, where we have to work around your schedule.”

“I think it’s your schedule we have to work around,” I said.

“Well I have to do my work.”

“Well I have to do mine.”

“Yes, all right. Fine.”

“That’s how you see me? Someone who teaches children?”

“That’s just how you all are.”

“All? what all?”

“All you foreigners who come here. Do you think Taiwanese children are not worth your time? They’re not good enough for you? That’s how you all are. You look down your nose at everything.”

“How can you say this garbage to me?”

“I’ve seen it before.”

I said nothing and we sat there in silence. She had her gaze fixed on the floor some ways before the couch. And she had tightened her embrace on the jacket.

“I feel as though I’m being presented to your friends for their approval, as though I’m undergoing some kind of assessment or… inspection.”

“Yes of course,” she said. And looked at me. “What else can we do? We’ve had so many negative things happen. You don’t know. You’re just a foreigner.”

“I’m just a foreigner.”

“You have no idea of what our country has been through. So much of it from foreigners interfering. We’re sick of it.”

We sat there in silence for a moment. The light from the bathroom made a vague parallelogram across the floor. It was an askew passageway to somewhere else. Then she rose, slipped her jacket on, and left without saying anything.

The next day I was in my office and there were students there as usual asking for a reference or to be admitted to a course or to have a thesis proposal approved, and I said yes yes yes to all of it, as I always did, and after they all had left my other group arrived, the translation group, the ones who were helping me with the mysteries of the administration. They came in and took their seats at the round table by the window. Eileen knocked and came in and placed papers on my desk then took a seat against the wall. D. came shortly after, knocking softly and then sticking her head around the door, as though to check if the coast was clear before entering and taking a seat beside Eileen. I thought we would be having another informal class and had prepared for that. D. brought out some things, and for a while we all relaxed with some small talk. But there was an undercurrent. Then at last there was an awkward silence and Vincent started in.

“Well, we went to the administration.”

“My aunt,” Tina put in with a brief glance around the table. I had never seen her before, a tall slim girl with henna dyed hair all the way down her back. We all smiled. I felt suddenly how much of an imposition it had been to put them up to this clearly awkward task. “They said,” Lillian continued. “That they…” “Well different people told us different things,” Jean said. She had one hand against the side of her brow and opened her fingers wide, reenacting puzzlement.

“One person said they didn’t see why you wouldn’t have it. But they weren’t sure.”

“And another said you could. They were pretty sure.”

Light through the blinds made zebra stripes on the table. The tea in my small cup was almost gold. D. had once again made tea for everyone.

“And the third said she didn’t know what the rule was, that we should ask one of the other foreign teachers.”

“So we went to Dr. Kate and she said she wasn’t sure, that she did have it but maybe they change the rules.”

I was surprised at this, since it was not what she had given me to understand. I remembered talking to Lu about this. We were in his office which was remarkably bare and very neat, like a hotel room after the maid service has been through. He sat in a large green leather armchair that seemed incongruously luxurious and indeed he did not seem comfortable in it but twisted his body this way and that as we sat talking. And the awkward subject came up.

“I do not really know, I cannot really say,” he reiterated, as he swept the edge of his palm backward across his right temple.

“We have been going through this for a year,” I remined him.

“I know, I know. I will look into it. I am confused myself. But you know you don’t help things. I know you have medical things going on, but you cannot miss classes. And then your assistant gets an appointment with the dean and that is another thing, you have to ask me for things like that, but anyway, and then you don’t show up!”

“Yes, I know. I didn’t get the message in time.”

“Moving to Taipei maybe was not a good idea. But anyhow. What did Kate say when you talked to her?” Here he seemed concerned in a way that I did not, at the time, know what to make of, and I rehearsed for him the relevant points.

“I see,” he said abstractly, his mind still elsewhere.

“What about meeting with the assistant dean or someone?”

“They are usually too busy. Let me try to figure out something.”

“All right,” I said and got up to leave and he rose as well to see me to the door, shaking my hand, as he always did. And at that point I couldn’t help myself. “If I don’t get a reasonable financial arrangement, then I would have to go back. And I can’t do that,” I said.

“I understand,” he said with genuine sympathy. “I know.”

“I can’t stand that place. I can’t stand the idea of going back there.”

“I know,” he said. “Let’s try to think of something. But let me handle things.”

But now Eileen, sitting far to my right, her face partly concealed by various nodding heads, had just mentioned that the *assistant* dean had agreed to meet with me. There were evidently things Lu did not know, was not privy to. She knew that I would be surprised by this and craned her neck around to look right at me. Along with her smile there was also a discreet warning gaze that said *don’t mess up this time* and I with my own expression silently promised I wouldn’t. She and Lillian and I exchanged a quick silent understanding, since the two of them and Frances had made a special trip to my apartment the week before, and had sat there, silent, concerned, in my living room, their jackets crumpled in their laps to tell me the news that they had.

“You know the students –” Lillian started in, with some difficulty.

“Mostly the undergrads,” Frances put in, and Eileen nodded. “But the graduates too,” she said and Eileen nodded as though encouraging her to go ahead,

“Well they have been having these rumors.”

“Rumors?”

“Yes,” Eileen said.

“Yes, you know, like malicious.”

“About you.”

“That you are,” she went on, sparing Eileen the task. “That you are drunk in class sometimes and that you are too drunk or…”

“Or on drugs or…something.” They both looked down at their coats.

“I see.”

“That you cannot be a good teacher because of that. It’s crazy,” she added.

“Yes,” Frances said. “It’s crazy, it’s stupid.”

“Disgusting,” Lillian said. “I am ashamed this is happening.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “And it’s not your fault. Thank you for coming here just to tell me.” The three of them smiled.

And now the recollection of this was silently acknowledged by the three of us. Just then there was a knock at the door. “Come in,” I said in Mandarin. The students were always amused to hear me speak it. And then the person stepped in. It was Mei-Hwa. She was wearing black stretch leotards and a black skirt with flat shoes of the same color and a loose-fitting white sweater and over that a denim jacket. She had her hair pinned up at the back.

“Hello everyone,” she said in her perfect English and gave them all a big wave.

“Hellooo,” they all chirped back.

“Is this your translation class I have heard so much about?”

“Yes,” I said and just then, since she had left the door wide open, D. got up quickly to close it and then as quickly sat down.

“So what is it you are working on?”

Jean showed her the book. *Seven Miles of Fragrance*. Lucid, elegant poems of desire, love, disappointment. Mei-Hwa picked up the book and leafed through its pages back and forth. She knew that all eyes were on her. It was always a thing she seemed to bask in – attention. Then she began to read. It was one of the most profound pieces – urgent and imploring, yet reticent in its refined music. Her voice was just as elegant, just as refined, and she revealed then, at least to me, the beauty of the language itself that we call Mandarin, its inherent elegance, its bell-like clarity. Then it was done, and she put the book down, not looking at anyone. The room was still, and we were all silent for a moment. Then they all smiled at once and she got a discreet yet sincere showering of applause. She beamed and made a little half-serious bow.

“Yay,” Evangeline said. “That was so beautiful.”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“That was great,” I said. And she gave me a meaningful glance that seemed to say ‘and guess why I’ve come here.’

Then she sat down and joined the group but was silent the whole time. She followed the discussion carefully, nodding when a student read from their translation or ventured an opinion, her beautiful smile cast like sunlight itself on the whole group. And the students, nervous at first, relaxed after a bit. They seemed to know who she was, and they valued her silent encouragement. I couldn’t help loving her even more. After a while class was over and they all got up to leave. Normally they would linger a bit, but this time they seemed to know that she and I needed to be alone, and they gathered up their things and filed out amid discreet nods. D. didn’t look at me but put away the tea things and slipped silently out the door. Eileen opened the fingers of one hand as a sort of wave. Then we were by ourselves.

“They seem to really like you a lot,” she said. She turned and reached for her jacket that was draped over the back of her chair. “I guess so,” I said. They’re incredible students. They work so hard. They’re so smart.”

“Mmm,” she said.

“I love them.”

“Yes, I do too. I want…” And she stepped over to the window and reached for the draw string. She drew up the blinds a little and gazed out the window. The evening was coming in. The outlines of distant buildings were dark across the horizon and an orange red sun shone through ragged visors of charcoal clouds. I felt something was wrong and went to her and she turned and we interlaced the fingers of both our hands.

“Are you ok?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“What were you going to say?”

“Nothing,” she said. “I’ll tell you later.”

“Tell me now,” I said and held her a little more tightly.

“No, later.” She turned and met my gaze.

“So, do you know why I came here?”

“I was wondering.”

“It was to see you. A surprise. A surprise visit. Were you surprised?”

“I was. Just to see me?”

“Of course. I missed you. Why else?”

I learned later that this was a lie and perhaps I half suspected it was, even at the time. But I didn’t care. “I love you,” I said and pressed my lips against her forehead. “I will do anything for you.”

“Well, we’ll see about that,” she said and gave me another smile. And I held her tightly against me.

CHAPTER 12

The day came for the meeting with the Assistant Dean that Eileen had been able to arrange, one James Chu, a professor of Chinese literature. I had only lately learned that he was a close friend of Linn, someone who had gradually assumed the lineaments of a definite and rather intransigent enemy. And so, I had a certain hesitancy about the whole thing but went ahead anyway, especially since I had really no alternative. According to Eileen, and Lu as well, the dean himself had been so annoyed at my not

turning up to that meeting that he would probably not agree to another, at least not anytime soon.

His office was in one of the administration buildings, a glass and tile cube, the tiles like a giant version of the things you line a shower with. The beige front steps were streaked with veil-like smears of mud from the rains. I opened the door to the waiting room. It was very quiet. Polished wooden floorboards gleamed, and the secretary nodded smiling and told me in unaccented English that Professor Chu would see me and she nodded for me to just go in. There was a vertical brass handle like a long spike to the heavy blond oak door. I stepped in and Professor Chu was behind a large mahogany desk. He was staring into a computer screen then turned his gaze toward me and managed a small smile. The afternoon light came through the gauzy curtains and made patterns like ghostly lemon slices on the polished floor. There were three paintings on the wall – not done in a traditional Chinese style but modern western abstract pieces, fizzy scratchy smears in bright colors in the manner of say Cy Twombly or the like. Chu himself was short and wiry, athletic looking, perhaps about 40. He had a rather flat face, a dark complexion and large expressive eyes, sort of triangular, and a wide mouth with somewhat stained teeth. Somehow I had the impression of a secret chain smoker. He was not unfriendly and talked a great deal and volubly and I could sense he had been briefed in advance and had been expecting me for a while.

“Hello,” he said. “Sit down, please.”

I took a seat and he went on to talk nostalgically about his time in graduate school in the United States, Stanford in his case. *So beautiful* he reiterated or else *so great so wonderful I loved.* And then finally I broached what I had come to think of as the delicate and awkward subject. And his response was somewhat startling, though I had gathered a premonition of it in his manner, to say nothing of the series of confusing signals that had led me to ask to see him in the first place. He leaned back in the black leather

swivel chair, his lower body hidden behind the darkly lustrous mahogany desk.

“Yes,” he said, “I have heard about this.” Then, “I guess it is some sort of confusion.” He leaned his forehead forward a bit on the last word to emphasize.

“Yes, it really is. I don’t know where I stand.”

“Hmm, yes.”

I felt suddenly rather friendly toward him and confided more than I’d intended. “If I don’t have the right sort of arrangement in that respect, I will have to go back.” He nodded silently.

“And I really don’t want to. I can’t.

“Why can’t you? It’s your country.”

“I feel that it isn’t anymore. I don’t know how to describe it…”

“Yes, well you don’t have to explain. I know how it is to have a country that has many problems. Sometimes you feel like you don’t even belong there, even though you were born there.”

“Yes,” I said.

“What I can say is that unfortunately I really don’t know what the current policy is. In the past it is true there were people who didn’t want foreign teachers to stay here. There are still some like that. But it is changing now. The time is different. Foreign men especially, not to stay permanently. I am embarrassed to admit it, but it is true.” He looked toward the window, seeming to study the lemon slices on the floor, which wavered and glowed in their luminous realm.

“I don’t really know how things stand currently,” he said. “My best advice would be for you to consult with the other two foreign teachers in your department. They have both been here a long time, so they maybe can guide you through this process or at least clarify things for you.”

I went back to my place and later that evening beset with insomnia. I went out late for a walk. I went up through the campus by the same route I had taken to see Kate and paused repeatedly by the side of the narrow road

and looked out into the dark bamboo forest that covered the hillslope. As wonderful as the place was, and in so many ways, and as wonderful as the people were, there was a certain unwelcoming even hostile spirit at times, but I felt that I could understand the reasons. Ironically, they were the same reasons that had driven me to come here in the first place: the same order of evil and criminality that had seen me from birth as a mere object to be used one way or another, including as mere cannon fodder, had also seen the entire country, this island, as a mere pawn in the chess game of the great powers. I stood there in that same spot near the milky blue utility light looking out into the dark forest slopes. A wind was picking up, and perhaps there would be a storm. And it seemed that my thoughts were commented on by the eerie clicking sound of the bamboo trees stirred by the night wind.

The next day Mei-Hwa called me in the morning and said that she wanted to show me some “special things” as she put it. I wondered what she might referring to but naturally I agreed. Some part of me wanted to tell her about the trouble I was having at the school and maybe get her opinion, but for some reason I didn’t.

She picked me up outside my apartment house. It was a bright day with piled up cumulus clouds swept across a white-blue sky and in the midst of it a now diluted tropical sun, and there was a brisk wind. She drove fast, too fast, the way she always did.

“Be careful,” I said.

“Don’t worry.” And she tossed my concern back to me with two little finger flicks. Then she smiled at me then swept her nose back toward the traffic moving past, concentrating.

“Where are we going?”

“I have to do an errand. And I wanted to show you a special museum – of contemporary art.”

“Ok.”

“It’s very special. I really love that place.” She stroked the air with elegant fingertips. “I wrote an article about a few years ago.”

After threading through the Taipei traffic, we arrived at a low stone and glass building with a mazy ramp-like entrance path. Inside, high windows strained bright sunlight into dusty lattices, and we moved with amused curiosity around various “installations.” She led me here and there around these odd constructions – mostly of metal, but there was wood and stone and other materials – and rope – in puzzling arrangements. She skipped to one, then another, then ducked behind another, peeping at me through a window-like aperture in one, then ducking across to wave at me from its opposite edge, then skipping back to the window, and I followed after her as she rushed over to another and stood at mock attention for a moment – come and get me, her body said. No, over here, and she ran, her flat shoes going pitter-patter on the floor tiles. A man I took to be a guard regarded us with a certain studied concentration.

“Mei-Hwa, come on…”

“Where are we going?” Then she came up to me. The light caught the blush around her cheekbones. And once again I fell in love with her elegant but slightly woozy smile and the little beauty mark at its corner. Her beauty was full of precious endearing flaws and I held her briefly, and by then we had seen enough.

Back in her car I drew her over to me.

“Not here,” she said giving a mock shove against my thigh. Then I held her face in my two hands

“What?” she said.

“Nothing.”

I studied her incredible eyes in which intelligence, playfulness, and a strange secrecy mingled, the secrecy contrasting with her extraversion, her volubility, at times her volatility.

“I have to do an errand,” she said.

We drove over to the other side of town to a car repair shop. She parked in a small shaded-over space near a side entrance. The high windows were lit from far inside, and dim forms moved amid metallic shapes and fragments of murky light.

“I have to see someone in here,” she explained. “He was my boyfriend for a while. Ok? But that was a long time ago. But we’re still friends.”

“Yes, ok.”

“So I just have to go and get something from him.”

At that point a slim compact guy of about Mei-Hwa’s age came out and leaned in over the fishbowl of the windshield. The bright day shone in on one side with a piece of blue sky, and he waved with one hand deliberately as though signaling. Mei-Hwa put the window on my side down and he stepped over.

“Jack, this is my friend.”

“Hello,” he said, in English, and dipped his forehead briefly.

“I have to go in and talk to him for a minute.” And with that she got out and the two of them disappeared through the shop’s side door. Perhaps a twinge of jealousy went through me, or perhaps not. At the time I couldn’t tell. A few minutes later she came back out, alone, and holding in her hand a small package about the size and shape of a man’s wallet. She smiled as she got in and put the small package in the back seat. There was something about her manner that seemed to discourage inquiry, so I didn’t ask about it. Then she said she wanted to go back to her place.

We were in her bedroom, lying on the two mattresses on the floor. It was afterward and we had been talking and suddenly she got up and snatched the robe from the nail on the bookcase where she’d hung it and reached a hand out to me –

“Come on,” she said as she left the room.

“What?”

“Come on,” she said as she called from the room down the hall that served as an office. “I want to show you,” she said as she gathered a couple

of accordion files from a low shelf. She drew the robe around herself and knotted the belt and then set the two files down in the middle of the floor,

“I want to show you. I want you to know.”

“Know what?”

“I want you to know who I am.”

The room was still dark. Her bare legs shown a pale ivory against the green throw rug. There were photographs in the files. She spread them out on the rug. Then, because the room was dark, she took a small flashlight from the desk and turned it on. Then she flashed it in my eyes.

“Boom,” she said laughing. I grabbed her around the middle and pretended to tackle her.

“No no no, let me go!” she squealed. “*Bu guai, bu guai*.”

“Ok.”

“Behave. You have to let me explain.”

“All right.”

And she spread out more photos and placed the flashlight on its side making a fan of light across the array of photos. I wondered why she didn’t just turn the room’s overhead light on. It was as if we were hiding out from someone, having a secret meeting that no one must know about. The secrets were scenes from her life. There was a photo of Mei-Hwa standing with three other young women in the newsroom office of the tv station where for a while she worked as a reporter. There was a picture of her standing in the courtyard-like entrance of a government building where fishermen were holding a protest. She is talking to a grizzled veteran, listening carefully, a notebook cradled against her chest. “They were protesting, so the government would give better insurance. You know for accidents or if they get injured. Or you know killed…so dangerous, what they do. People don’t think…their families go through so much. Terrible. They are such amazing men.” Then there was a picture of her sitting on a stone bench under a huge *rong* tree, the canopy of aerial roots like a loose

basketweave above them, her and three friends, two women and one man, he with his arm around her.

“We were on a hike.”

“I see.”

“Don’t be jealous.”

“I’m not.”

“Was a long time ago.”

“Ok.”

Here she is again, the same notebook tucked in the crook of one arm, sitting on a bench outside a large brick building. She is absorbed in conversation with three young women who sit crowded close to each other in a row on the bench beside her. She explained that they were new immigrants to the country, and she was interviewing them about their experiences.

Then we were back in her bedroom, the covers wrapped around us since it was chilly at night now. A space heater glowed and ticked softly in the corner. I held her against me. We weren’t talking. Then, apropos of nothing she said, “I have to try to fix everything.” I didn’t know what she meant. “Ok,” I said.

“You know?”

“Yes,” I said.

“There is so much evil.”

“Sure.”

“But there is so much good.”

“I will always help you.”

“I don’t need help.”

“I’m not saying that. I’m saying I always will.”

“Ok,” she said and smiled and closed her eyes. The small lamp she had on the floor near our bed was on low and dim shadows were cast on the wall. After a while, I reached over and turned it off.

CHAPTER 13

Dr. Gretchen, as she was called – it seemed to be an established custom that the two American women would choose this somewhat diminutive mode of address for themselves, Dr. Gretchen and Dr. Kate – had returned from her somewhat obscure yet extensive fieldwork, and coming from the far flung and remote fields of the Urals and the Altaics and the Southern Slavic now sat at the seminar table in my office, her bony pale forearms resting across each other, her shoulders a bit hunched, looking like an athlete resting between plays. Shaking her helmet of straw-like hair, casting quick meaningful glances at intervals, seeming to be distracted by second thoughts branching to thirds which then returned to the start, she was conveying the history of the department as she had known it for the twenty years she had been there. At a certain point she inquired about “that woman you have visiting.” I had a feeling I knew which woman she was referring to and that it was not D., though a lingering doubt remained, but then in another moment she dispelled that with another meaningful glance.

“That writer,” she specified. “She used to be a student of Linn’s, you know.”

“That’s what I was told,” I said. “When did you see her?”

“The other day when she was here. Evidently, she went and said hello to him.” “I don’t know her myself,” she went on, leaning back in her seat and avoiding my glance, “but I know who she is. Some of her friends know some friends of my friends… this type of thing.”

“Yes, I see.”

“So you’re making a wider range of friends. That’s good, you won’t be lonely. I’ve always been a bit concerned…. Do you still have that local girl for your tutor?”

“Yes.” I said.

“Well in any event, I just wanted to say I think this review is rather exaggerated. I’ve told them that.” I was startled for a second. What kind of ‘review’? I thought but said nothing. “I’m sure whatever problems there might have been in the past are cleared up by now, or soon will be. Just between you and me, they don’t have any idea what it can be like to do this type of move cross-culturally.”

“No, they don’t,” I said.

“But one thing that is a concern is this whisper campaign. Did you hear of this?”

I thought for a second. “No,” I said.

“Well evidently.”

“And the result has been…” she went on, looking down at the floor, and losing her thought. Then she looked back up and continued, “… and I don’t know how this could be, and especially now….” And she looked off toward the row of bookcases opposite. Bright light and shadow moved though the room because of large clouds outside passing.

“Especially now?” I asked.

“Yes well….” She tilted her head in my direction just briefly as though pouring something out of her ear. “Never mind,” she said, looking down shaking her head. “So well it seems as though certain parties have decided to start an investigation into your mental fitness, a fitness review to see if you’re…” and she shrugged her shoulders and opened both hands palms up like tossing two balls upward at once “…able to teach.”

“Some of these things have been seen before. You know Simon – well his wife was subjected to smears and rumors…of a different sort of course. It was unaccountable, absurd.”

“I never heard of that,” I said. But it was as if she was conversing with herself more than with me. ”Yes, yes,” she added reflectively. “I’m retiring soon,” she added. “Well, we want to keep you. You know,” she said by way of emphasis. “I’ll deal with this. But,” she added, looking straight at me. “Say nothing to anyone.”

We ended with the usual pleasantries. After a while, it was time for me to teach my last class, and after that I got the bus back to Taipei.

It's a strange feeling to be alone in a city where you know almost no one. I looked out the window at the open-air market across the way. Now it was around seven and it was dark. Hundreds of people milled around below in the pedestrian concourse, flowing by like currents of dark beads, or standing in clumps here and there, dimly illuminated by a sort of yellowish or olive drab light from the market stalls. In the distance, the city lights from buildings along the Jong Shan North Road broke through the dark. A tree just below the window, leafless now, was grayly lit by the streetlight near it, looking like a construction of bone.

I didn't hear from her for several days after that, and I was beginning to be somewhat worried, to the point where I was on the verge of calling up her friend Pei-Wen, who had sent me a cordial note after our meeting at the jazz club that night and which had included her phone number, "in case you need anything." Then one evening the phone rang. I had been pacing around the empty apartment. It was Mei-Hwa, and I was somewhat surprised.

"How have you been?" I said.

"I'm good. I want you to come here."

"Come where?"

"Where I am," she said. There was some strange noise in the background.

"Where's that?"

She went on to say that she had to stay there all night for an editing session that she had to do with a film maker she was working with. "It's a documentary. Very important. Come and see me. Ok? I want you here. I want you to see how we work."

"Ok but how do I get there?"

"Brit will pick you up. We don't need her right now."

“Are you all right?” I said.

“Yes, I’m fine.” Her voice very perky. “Why?”

“I was just wondering.”

“I have a surprise for you.”

“What?”

“You’ll see.”

“Ok, but how do I get there? Brit?”

“Yes, she’ll pick you up. It’s way out in the country. She’ll be there in a little bit. She’ll call you.”

“All right.”

I was puzzled about why she was so intent on having me there for an all-night editing session. Was I supposed to stay there all night with her? Her job had been to write the film’s voice-over narration, and now the text had to be adjusted in different ways to fit the pacing and rhythm. As it turned out, Brit, who had acting experience, was doing the voice over.

She did call shortly after, and we arranged for her to pick me up. To make it easier for her, I stood out on Jin Shi Street near a buffet restaurant that served as a nice landmark. And before long she pulled up, waving to me from inside the car’s dark fishbowl.

“Hey,” she said as I opened the door. “Hey hey…”

“Hi Brit.”

“So glad you could make it.”

“Where are we going?”

“Do you like this?” and she twisted herself partway around to display her blouse, squaring her shoulders toward me as she steered with the other hand.

“Yes. Is it new?”

“No, old. Just haven’t worn in a while. I’m not wearing a bra. Can you tell?”

“Well, not really.”

“Oh,” she said in a pout.

“Well you’re just pointed in the wrong direction,” I said.

She laughed a little. “That’s very funny. Pointed wrong way. I will have to get out later and point toward you, so you can see. Hao ma?”

“If you want.”

“If I want. What do you want? Never mind, I know,” she said. Streetlights passed, slicing through, and the beautiful planes of her face were sequentially but dimly lit.

“You know?”

“Yes I know, of course.” And she tapped my thigh with the back of her free hand. “But I have to tell you something. Really. Very serious.” By now we had passed the outskirts of the city, heading south toward Tao Yuan, an expansive semi-rural area of alternately flat rice fields and wooded hills. It was a long shaded-in corridor of a road. Her mood seemed to have changed and she looked straight ahead, drawing a bead at some point in the dark, ignoring me. After a bit I thought I should break the spell.

“What is it?”

“Well you know what I told you before, right?”

“About?”

“About her. And how she got…” she made a rowing gesture from herself outward. “So sick. You remember?”

“Yes.”

“So. Now. That not all. She tried to hurt herself. Maybe kill herself. She took an overdose of medication she had. Pei-Wen found her. They lived together you know. Had to call ambulance. She had to be in the hospital for a while. I want you to know.” And she extended one hand, the fingers spread as though steadying something. “She is my oldest friend,” she went on, patting the air with that hand, one for each syllable. “I want her to be happy. She has been very unhappy. In her work – yes, very good. But in her private life, no. Very lonely. And she is more happy now than I have seen her in a long time. Long time.” By now the headlights swept over the brick and wrought iron of the entry to a gated community of some kind. There

was a main building like an old-fashioned chateaux and we made our way up the circular front drive, stopping just before the main entrance.

“Here,” she said and reached around into the back seat and drew out a small box. “It’s for you.”

“What is it?”

“A present. From her. She told me to give it to you.”

I opened it. Inside there was a small traditional ceramic tea pot, beautifully made, elegant rather than ornate, seeming to say *I am precious*. Inside the teapot a note which read:

I love you. You are the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. I know that I’m difficult sometimes. I hope you will understand. I want you to understand many things. I hope we can do it together. This is a special tea pot. It’s from a famous tea house where the dissidents would have secret meetings, back in the time of the White Terror. It is very symbolic for me. I hope you will accept it.

“So now I have to tell you one more thing. Mei-Hwa has decided something about your relationship.”

“What?”

“I can’t say. She told me not to. It is very important to her. I want you to know. I’m going to leave this here. Ok?”

“Yes, ok. A safe place.”

Inside, Mei-Hwa sat together with the director, a short plump woman in a loose-fitting white blouse with puffy sleaves and denim skirt. They both looked at us and smiled but continued their conversation. Then they went into an adjoining room. The place itself was a modified apartment with one long room with polished wood floorboards and a long couch against one wall, a tv screen opposite, low table in the middle. At the other end near the entry where we came in there was a small office space with a desk and computer. We sat down on the couch. The director’s assistant, a young guy, thin with long hair, asked us if we would like coffee or tea but we declined. Brit looked at me, then looked around at the room – it was a beautiful place

in a very exclusive building – heavy wrought iron gate before the main door, an electronic lock, black stone slabs for the floor in the atrium and smooth silent elevators. Then she looked back at me, as though to say, wow, her eyes wide in mock amazement. But of course she was a rich girl herself and nothing in that way much impressed her. Then Mei-Hwa appeared from the other room. She smiled and waved with crinkly crawly fingers at Brit and asked me to come with her. She led me into the other room she had come from. In there the director sat at a large terminal with a young woman, the film editor, who was seated at the editing machine. The director smiled at us, but the film editor remained focused on what she was doing. It seemed like she was trying to figure out some problem. Mei-Hwa sat down briefly near the director then got up and looked over the film editor's shoulder for a minute. Then she came to me and explained they were trying to calculate the rhythm and duration of sections. It seemed that her text had to be modified in order to fit in, but she didn't seem bothered by it. Instead, she was concerned about the other problems the director was having. She made a gesture and we took our leave, for her just temporarily. We passed through the other room, Brit watching us we went out the door. Then we were in the hallway. It was a dark high-ceilinged space of stone floors like onyx and wide stairsteps leading down and up with dark wood banisters. High windows looked out onto the parking area and the fields and trees beyond. We were well outside the city. "So," she said, and led me away from the door and down along one wall. She had her arms crossed before her chest and her eyes scanned my face, searching out my mood, sifting through me. What would be true, and what untrue?

"Did Brit tell you what I decided?"

"No, she just said you decided something," I said. "About our relationship."

"Yes, that's true." She blinked and looked at me, her gaze wavering about. I drew her to me, and she unknotted her arms and I ran my fingertips along her forearms.

“What?” I said.

“I want you to know more about what I’m doing,’ she said. She looked down at the floor and then back up. “And that others are doing,” she added.

“Yes, ok.”

“So you have to go with Pei-Wen and her friend James tomorrow night.”

“Go where?”

I drew her to me and she pressed her face into my chest and then looked up. “You’ll see. They’ll pick you up. They’ll explain. At the bus. I won’t be in till later.”

“That’s fine. Pick me up to go where?”

“You’ll see.”

“Why won’t you tell me?”

“It has to be secret.” She looked at me and leaned her head to the side. “Ok?”

“Ok.”

“Don’t tell anyone about this at all. I’m trusting you now.” And she pushed my chest a little with eight fingertips. “This is what I decided – that I could trust you. Did you read the note?”

“Yes.”

“Then you already know. So will you go with them?”

“Of course. Is this dangerous? For you?”

“It could be, probably not. Otherwise, we wouldn’t take you. But there is danger…around. Remember, I’m trusting you now, beyond anyone I ever have before. You are very special to me. I love you.”

I drew her to me. The feel of her body against me in the high cold drafty stair way. She was so precious to me then. It was always the same. “I love you too,” I said.

In the evening, Pei-Wen called me and said she and a “companion” would meet me at the main station when I got into town. I wondered what it

was that I heard in her voice – a certain tension, perhaps a nervousness…. Was there even fear? I came to the very edge of asking about this but then pulled back and said nothing. Shortly after, I was on the bus into Taipei. I had a seat toward the back, and looking forward one saw a row of palely illuminated cubicles, the capacious seats with their reading lights on. Looking out the window, I saw my own face light-spotted, darkly transparent, framed by the visors of my hands which seemed themselves to be flowing over the landscape. I turned my light off and the land came into view – the rice paddies, lattices of dark water, that shaded up into low hills cupping themselves around orchards of fruit trees, flat expanses of peanut fields rising gently upward from the road in the midst of which might stand a stone farmhouse, swallow tailed roof and field stone outer walls, or a shrine some way away lit with a red star-like point within, more orchards, more rice paddies stretching away beneath an ink black sky and a moon like mother-of-pearl, rags of cloud flowing past.

Then there was the skyline of the city in the distance and soon the dip down into the city itself – the bridge, its spars sweeping past so close and the swoop down further to the Chong Ching Road, the huge temple, darkly ferociously ornate in the manner of some Buddhist temples, the Taipei School for the Deaf, a small college, really, with its brick walls and courtyard, and then the straight way into the station, other buses already lined up in half chevrons, the station's high windows lit yellow and green, the tense rumble of traffic. It was the rush hour, the intersection choked with cars and trucks and hundreds of motorcycles, many with two or even three people on them, the huge concrete abutments, dark and sinister, and above, the walkway across to the main train station. But as I got out, I saw a small slim woman standing near a car on the opposite side of the lot. She was waving with one hand while with the other she held the car door part way open. It was Pei-Wen looking small and fragile amidst the squadron of huge buses looming around, jockeying for positions.

"Hi," she said as I came near. "Did Mei-Hwa talk to you?"

“She’s always talking to me. She talks, I listen.”

She tilted her head back and smiled. “Ok,” she said. “Well, I can’t do anything there.” And she opened the back door for me to get in then slid herself into the front passenger seat.

“Steve, this is Jim. Jim this is Steve *lao shu*.”

“Hi” – he looked into the rear-view mirror and waved and raised the rest of his face up to the level of the mirror and smiled, almost laughing. Then he concentrated on the traffic. There was a quick exchange between them in Taiwanese that I couldn’t understand. I was surprised that Pei-Wen was as fluent in that as she seemed to be. Then she twisted around to talk to me.

“So as I was going to say, we are going to a restaurant that Brit’s family owns. And then after that we will go to a different place. She will meet us there.” She nodded as though to emphasize her words. Then she turned back around and again spoke briefly, quickly, to Jim in Taiwanese and he nodded. The night city with its swarming traffic flowed around the car. Then we turned into a small side street that only two cars could pass with difficulty. Then another turn, into an even narrower street. There were no streetlights here, only utility and security lights, white and cobalt blue, at the edges of the buildings, and rows of dumpsters along a brick and concrete wall, dogs darting here and there, many potholes, then we parked near one of the dumpsters and a man emerged from out of the ground as our headlights swept along a brick wall, but it was a steel trapdoor that covered a cellar entrance. He motioned to us and opened a door near the cellar. A white light came from inside and made a pie wedge onto the asphalt. Jim cut the engine and we got out. There were greetings in Mandarin. The man was tall and slim with a white shirt and black pants, slightly stooped in a courtly fashion. I was introduced and he smiled, bowed slightly, but said nothing.

Then we were led through into the kitchen itself. There were a half dozen cooks and another half dozen helpers and bus boys moving from

stove to stove to various tables, various pots, steamers, woks, chopping blocks, honeycombs of bright fluorescent lights over them slightly buzzing, two silver doors stood at the room's one end and people opened them and stepped in, exiting quickly amid whisps of icy vapor. The floor was black tiles with crème colored grouting. We were led down a small passageway with off-white concrete walls with various fuse boxes. Then there was a steel door painted olive green and he unlocked this and stepped aside to let us in. Pei-Wen snapped on the overhead light. She seemed familiar with the place and motioned me to have seat at a large round table. The room seemed to double as a storage space, with cardboard boxes piled along two walls, and an accounting office, with a large desk at one side and two safes. Then the door closed and there were the three of us.

"Well," Pei-Wen started in, "I don't know how much Mei-Hwa told you, maybe not that much."

"No."

"Ok well that's good and Brit, what did she say?"

"Just that she had decided something and that it was very important to her, to Mei-Hwa."

"Yes," Pei-Wen said.

"And Mei-Hwa said that she was trusting me. That's how she put it."

Pei-Wen nodded and was about to say something when there was a sudden banging on the door which after a second swung open. It was Brit. "Ni hao, ni hao." And she closed the door behind her. She was wearing her usual tight designer jeans and a loose-fitting blouse. She had a chamois-colored jacket that she tossed onto a chair. She had her hair tied up in a short ponytail, but she undid the clasp and it flowed down to her shoulders. Pei-Wen watched but said nothing. Then she and Jim glanced at each other. Brit didn't seem to notice.

"Hello," she said to me and fished a pack of cigarettes out of one of the jacket pockets. "How are you doing?"

“I’m ok,” I said as I watched her light her cigarette. She blew smoke toward the light. “Not supposed to smoke in here I know.” She reached her arm up as though to claw down some of the smoke. “Can’t help it. I smoke when I get nervous.” And she gave the fingers of her free hand a kind flick as though to say ‘oh well.’ “I asked him to bring in tea,” she added. And just then the door opened and the tall gentleman came in with a teapot and a service of small cups on a tray. He distributed the cups and poured the tea and then left.

“Well, I was just saying,” Pei-Wen went on. “I wasn’t sure what you told Steve *lao shu*. But now –”

“We have to tell you everything,” Brit said and made a big arc in the air with both hands. I realized she had been drinking. The other two knew this too. Jim looked grave. Pei-Wen was expressionless.

“Well, you know,” Jim started in. He was thin and quietly intense yet also modest, down to earth, and rather friendly in his own soft-spoken way. “We have had a very bad situation here. In Taipei. In Taiwan. And you know Mei-Hwa is a writer and has many friends like that. I am not a writer. Sometimes I say that I am as a disguise.” And here he laughed out loud. Pei-Wen and Brit both smiled. “I am in reality a *policeman.*” He emphasized the word, his voice suddenly gruff and hoarse yet also a bit jocular.

At that point there was another knock at the door, two soft raps, almost hesitant, and two more people came in. It was Tseng the actor whom I had met before, and Stacy Huang. “Hey,” she said and smiled broadly, pushing her nose forward. Tseng nodded toward me gravely. They sat down next to each other. They were both dressed all in black and they seemed to be waiting for someone to say something. Then Tseng broke the silence. “Nice to see you again,” he said and tilted his shoulders toward me in a somewhat courtly manner. “Nice to see you,” I said. He silently regarded me in his usual assessing manner.

“Well, we were just telling *lao shu* what the whole situation is.” Tseng nodded but said nothing. Stacy looked troubled but gave me another broad

smile. Then they told me as much of the whole story as they seemed to think best. I was startled by it all but concealed this as best I could. After a few minutes, Jim announced, “Well now I think it’s time,” as he glanced at his watch which looked strangely large on his thin wrist and long slim forearm. And we all got up and filed out, Jim leading the way.

CHAPTER 14

We went out through the same back hallway, the tall slim gentleman holding the door open for us. He seemed to be looking about as though on the alert for something and there was a glance exchanged between him and Jim and Pei-Wen. The wind had picked up and the sky was filled with smoky ragged gray clouds pouring across. Then we were all in the one car, Jim driving and Pei-Wen in the passenger's seat with Stacy between them, Tseng and I in the back with Brit between us. The headlights threw two ivory cones before us and they picked out steel gray dumpsters, empty oil drums, piled up empty crates, their wood flashing briefly white, a stray cat darting out from under one then springing quickly back. Then we were free of the narrow alley and threading through the city's dense criss-cross of side roads. Two-lane streets with no sidewalks, four and five story buildings on both sides, crème-colored tiles, silver rails on the second floor balconies, small trees as tall as a man in cauldron-like pots at the roadside, then two young women walking toward us, opposite a middle aged man in loose pants and white tee shirt, floppy sandals on his feet, tossing a cigarette and ducking under a half-raised accordion pleat door. More streets, the car following a strange zig zag pattern. Then we parked in another narrow street, darker, with older buildings. We got out and stood around under the arcade-like walkway that led along the edges of the blocks. The wind was still strong. The moon was bright with luminous cloud veils around it.

"We have to wait for them," Pei-Wen said to me, by way of explanation. The others silently acknowledged. Two dogs skirted about on the other side of the road, circled gamboling beneath a streetlight and disappeared. Then a car pulled up, headlights boiling then dim and then

dark. Two people got out. It was Mei-Hwa and Martin, the tall cordial guy who had presided over the get-together at the Blue Note. He raised one hand. “Hello,” he said. Mei-Hwa smiled at me but said nothing. She seemed to be expecting the others to say something, but no one did. “Well let’s go now, it’s time to go,” Pei-Wen said. And then Jim took some keys out of his pocket and opened the heavy steel door. There was a small landing with a mere chip of light from above and a long narrow set of stairs leading up to a hallway. The hallway had gray floor tiles, cracked and discolored, and was bathed in a yellowish light. There were several doors and he rapped on one with two knuckles before using another key that he had, opened it, stuck his head in, looking left and right quickly, and then opened the door wider to let us all in and we filed in past him.

The front room was empty. There was a wooden table with some chairs. A low couch along one wall. An ornamental screen beside it showing birds and flowering branches with snow-like blossoms. In the next room, three young women sat on mattresses on the floor. There was no place to sit, so we all stood there for a moment. There were a few pleasantries, but I couldn’t catch any of it. The three of them had long hair down their back. They all were in nightgowns above, with jeans below, and floppy sandals. One was barefoot. There was a door to the right and one could see two other mattresses on the floor there. Near this one on the floor was a small dish with a candle, matches, some cookie wrappers and a half empty pack of cigarettes. The three of them had a dazed listless look as though they had been up all night. They regarded us with wariness.

Brit sat down on the mattress beside them, and they moved over as a group to make room. She was asking them how they were, if they were sleeping ok, what about the food, was it all right, had they lost weight at all. To this last they all nodded yes, laughing a little. “It’s ok,” one said, “I needed to anyway.” And they all laughed a bit more. Brit took out a pack of imported French cigarettes – “the only kind I like,” she had said to me once with a grin – and offered it around. They all took one, seeming to be curious

and then she took out her lighter and the two farther away leaned over. They all sat there smoking.

Mei-Hwa laughed at the odd picture they made, and they all laughed too. “Where are all your chairs?” she said in mock objection. “My legs are tired.”

At this one sprang up, cigarette in her mouth, and rushed into the front room to get one of the chairs there and then another followed her and they brought back two chairs. Then the last got up and went into the space that must have been the kitchen and dragged two chairs back with her. She laughed and made a joke and the others laughed too and Brit rolled onto her side on the mattress, she was laughing so hard. Then she straightened up and drew a little flask out of her bag. It was Japanese bourbon and she offered it around and each of them took a small decorous pull and then Brit offered it to us holding it up her arm fully extended. No, no thank you, we all said. “Come on, Brit,” Pei-Wen said. “Where I’m going?” Brit said, and she took another pull and then gave it to the girls to keep.

The three sat there, smoking and sipping whiskey, and we sat on wooden chairs in a semi-circle opposite them. There hadn’t been enough chairs, so Jim and I both sat on the floor, our knees pulled up before us. Sometimes he stood and moved softly around the place as though checking various things. Mei-Hwa joined Brit in drawing out the girls, asking them about their life and day-to-day activities. There was a certain hesitancy on their part, and at times they looked at each other seeming to check with each other before answering. But Mei-Hwa and Brit were relaxed and unintrusive and lightened things with many jokes and banter. At one point Brit passed her cigarettes around along with the flask of whiskey which had just been sitting there, both gratefully accepted with some giggling.

Through all this Pei-Wen sat with arms folded across her middle, listening. She wore a creme turtleneck and dark slacks and an olive drab jacket which was draped across her lap. She was contained, observant, and seemed to be making mental notes. Tseng wandered out into the front room

and remained there. After a while Jim followed him. Brit sat near Mei-Hwa and regarded the girls and their stories with close sympathetic attention. At a certain point Pei-Wen broke in and asked them if they would “like to start.” There was a slight adjustment in which Brit and Mei-Hwa switched their attention from the three girls to Pei-Wen. The girls adjusted to this, and a certain gravity came over them. As a group they nodded yes. Then Pei-Wen got up and walked into the other bedroom. She was arranging something there. Then Mei-Hwa followed her and closed the door. There was the pressured silence of something discussed out of earshot.

Then the door opened and Pei-Wen came out and asked which of the girls would like to go first. They exchanged glances and shrugs and then the one nearest Pei-Wen raised her hand hesitantly and Pei-Wen nodded and Brit clapped loudly. ‘Yay yay yay’ she called out and the girls laughed, and Brit came over to her side and gave her a hug. Mei-Hwa came out and smiled broadly. “Hey ok,” she crooned and extended both her hands as one might to a child taking its first steps. The girl smiled, got up, and the three of them disappeared into the bedroom and the door closed.

Brit continued her clowning and the rest of us played along to some extent, though after a bit, conversation waned, and time hung heavy in the room. After a while the first girl came out and the next took her place as both Mei-Hwa and Pei-Wen came out to gently escort her in. The door closed again and there was a meaningful silence. The pattern was repeated, and she came out and the last girl replaced her. She was one who throughout this had taken several more pulls of Brit’s flask than the others and she was visibly unstable as she rose to meet the encouraging hands of Mei-Hwa and Pei-Wen. But they succeeded in getting her into the room and the door closed. The other two sat where they had been before on the mattress. Brit tried to draw them out and Jim also did, but their polite brief responses did not encourage conversation. A certain troubled look had come over them. They didn’t even talk to each other, but each was sunk into herself.

Voices became louder in the other room suddenly, though I couldn't tell what it meant. Then it stopped and there was tension in the air. Then there was a kind of stifled wail, and then a muffled struggle, but of the person with herself, a kind of stifled gasping and shuddering, perhaps almost retching. Then there was a sharp loud crying out: "No no – NO" – with more loud sobbing and sounds of physical struggle, and Jim and I both sprang up and opened the door. On the mattress was the girl twisted upon herself, both her hands shoved down between her legs and her legs twisted up, the ankles wrapped around each other. She was rocking back and forth, eyes closed. Mei-Hwa sat on the floor with her recorder beside her, her notebook cradled against her chest. Pei-Wen sat at the edge of the mattress, one hand placed on it near the girl. Her hand and reaching arm were like a lifeline she was casting.

The other two by now were standing in the doorway. Then Brit appeared and sat down near the girl and hugged her and she calmed down almost immediately and Brit spoke to her softly and the girl unwound herself and stood up with Brit's arm around her waist. She led her out to the other two and the three sat there as before but trying to comfort each other, holding hands and hugging each other. By something unspoken, Jim and I were requested to leave the bedroom and as we did the door was closed again. After a few moments there were sounds of arguing, muffled but intense. At moments a phrase or a single word rang out. Then the door flew open and Mei-Hwa marched out, her recorder and notebook tucked under one arm, her coat draped over the other. She looked at no one as she walked rapidly through the front room and toward the front door, pursued by both Pei-Wen and Brit.

"You can't just leave," Pei-Wen shouted.

"Yes, I can."

"You cannot just –"

At this Mei-Hwa opened the front door and stepped into the hallway, its yellow green light visible through the opening. Brit and Pei-Wen were

around her and there was an argument. Tseng tried to intervene but was shooed away and came back to where we were and paced around a bit. Then the front door opened, the yellow light shone again. Mei-Hwa was gone and Brit closed the door behind her as she and Pei-Wen came back.

No one said anything in the car on the way back to my place. It was raining out now. I sat in the back, Jim and Pei-Wen in the front. I didn't know where Mei-Hwa had gone to. I might have assumed she had gone back to her place, but something made me think that this might not be the case. Likewise, there was something in the silence which made me feel that asking about her was not a good thing to do just then. The lights of Taipei at night blared through the darkened glass in diamond-like sparks and streaks. Headlights effervesced, and the traffic was all around with its tremor and horn blasts. Then they dropped me off and we said goodnight and I climbed the stairs to my place and opened the door and shut and locked it behind me, and then I was alone once again. I wondered what it was that Mei-Hwa was leading me into, if indeed she was doing the leading. Or was she being led herself? I didn't know if I really wanted to see her anymore. Perhaps I should disconnect from her as gracefully as possible.

A day or two later Pei-Wen sent me a note and asked if I would meet with her and a couple other "friends of Mei-Hwa" as she put it. I hesitated to answer for several days. Then, thinking this was rude, I finally did, and when I did she managed to engage me in a bit of correspondence. I was evasive and non-committal but finally agreed to meet. And it was by this means that I gained some insight into what was happening in that scene in the girls' apartment as well as some crucial, and quite startling, other things.

CHAPTER 15

Dr. Gretchen passed back and forth behind the ranked book spines. I caught glimpses of her light-green shirt and the white-gold helmet of her hair in the spaces between shelves. There were books in linguistics, philosophy of language, Slavic and Ural-Altaic languages and Chinese. Also books on chess. Accordion pleats of light and shadow fell across one white wall. Her window had vertical slats for blinds that were partly drawn, but the windows that smoldered behind them were open.

"This is *gao shan* tea. High mountain. Is that all right?"

"Yes, that's fine."

"Good. Cause that's what you're getting."

Then she came out with a pot of tea on a tray and two western-style teacups. "Don't really like those dainty little Chinese teacups, don't tell anyone I said that."

She sat in a large wicker chair that was like a giant amber shell behind her, or maybe like the fan of a cobra. She was a short wiry woman of about sixty. Her face was thin, wrinkled like a withered-up apple, rather flat with high cheekbones and a splash of sandy-colored freckles across her nose and cheeks. The skin on her neck and throat was tightly pulled as was the skin on her face. She twisted her one leg over the other. She wore faded jeans and a loose-fitting yellow men's shirt with the shirt tails out and unbuttoned down to the top of her chest which was
hard-looking and bony.

“So I completely sympathize with you. You don’t want to go back. I wouldn’t either –terrible place. Where are they bombing now, do we know?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Right, we’re not sure, but we’re sure that they are.”

“I suppose, yes. If I can’t get a proper financial –

“Yes. Of course.”

“– arrangement here…. How can I stay?”

“Exactly. You can’t.”

“Yes, then I can’t stay,” I said. We were both silent for a moment and sipped our tea.

“Are you still seeing that girl who was teaching you?”

“She was just a teacher. I wasn’t seeing her.”

“Was?”

“Yes well, I moved.”

“Yes, right I heard that. How’s that working out?”

“I like it. It’s good. I love Taipei.”

“Yes, everyone loves Taipei. Linn’s former student was here I heard.”

“Former student?”

“Yes, you know, her name’s Mei-Hwa. She was his student before.”

“Oh yes, I know.”

“Are you seeing her these days? I mean let’s just be very direct here. The reason I ask is that he is a sort of controversial personality.”

“Controversial?”

“Well, you know, he does all these protests and speeches, been on television – all this kind of thing. And as I was saying – I don’t know how close you are – perhaps she’s introduced you.”

“He’s very standoffish.”

“When you’re with them, her and her friends and him? – I don’t know what you do.”

“No, I meant here – he almost scowls at me in the hallway sometimes.”

“Yes, he’s absurd sometimes. Well, you know….” Here she closed her eyes as though to emphasize and shook her helmet of hair “He did his degree in the US, and I guess he had some very bad experiences there.”

“I see.”

“But what I mean – no need to beat around the bush – I don’t think it would be good for you to be associated with him…in other people’s view. You don’t want to be seen as his ally or what have you.”

“I see.”

“It wouldn’t be good.”

“I’ve been thinking more about these financial things.”

“Right.”

“Yes.” She nodded and made a little chop with her hand. “Who is helping you with all that?”

“I’ve been talking to Lu.”

“I see. Well, you know he’s certainly interested in money. Because he *ha*s a lot *himself*. But sometimes he might not be the most reliable or maybe even the most honest.” She threw up both her hands and dipped her chin. As though to say *just what I heard don’t blame me.*

“And also,” I went on, “Professor Kate.” At this there was a subtle adjustment in her expression, but it vanished quickly.

“Ok, well good,” she said, “And the two of us will try to see about this pension thing. I don’t know why they say you’re not eligible. Both of us have it. I’ll talk to her. She has a whole history with Linn, you know.”

“Oh really?”

“Oh yes.”

“Are they still some sort of item?”

“Oh no no no. He’s married, you know. But besides his political activities, he – I don’t know how to put this – he has questionable tendencies as regards his female students. Not all of them, of course, but some.”

“I never heard that before.”

“Oh yes,” she said and gave her hair another shake. “And I have tried at different times to warn some of them.” Then she tilted one shoulder and twisted a bit toward me. “I will just say, just between the two of us, just advise female students away from his courses. Just discretely. You don’t have to say too much. Just kind of gently steer them away. Could you do that?”

“I don’t really think I could really do that, you know,” I said. She blinked and then dismissed the whole issue with a shake of her head. “Well, never mind,” she said. “Something has to be done, though.” And she let it drop.

That very night I received another call from Pei-Wen asking once again if I had time to meet with her and her associates. This time I said yes, and about an hour later they arrived. The bell rang and I let them in. There was Pei-Wen, Jim, and a third person, Evan Lu, a short slim guy with shoulder length hair, a bit of a goatee, and a quiet manner. He was dressed in black jeans, sneakers, and a leather jacket with a heavy grey sweatshirt underneath. For whatever reason I had the feeling that he was dressed quite differently than he usually would be.

“So *lao shu*,” Pei-Wen began rather formally, “we would like to explain more about the other night. We were sure that you must have different questions.” They sat on the couch in a row facing me. Behind them was a row of windows and beyond that the Shuang Lien pedestrian concourse, busy now in the evening and likewise the long open-air market where despite the cold windy weather there were maybe two or three hundred people. It was early evening. A faint wash of light was still left in the sky, the air going purple but the sky not yet dark.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” Jim said. He shrugged one shoulder in a wry almost apologetic manner.

“Sure, that’s fine.”

“I know I should quit. What can I say.” He lit his cigarette and a lacy membrane of smoke bloomed out then wilted before him.

“So,” he said, one elbow on his knee, the cigarette burning in that hand. Pei-Wen got up and went toward the kitchen and stopped. “Is there something we can use for his ashes?” she said. “Oh sorry,” Jim said and cupped the other hand under that one. “My ashes,” he called to her back. “I am not dead. You want to cremate me already.” Evan laughed softly. “Sorry. Didn’t think,” Jim said. “Thinking of other things.” Pei-Wen came back. “Is this ok?” She had a coffee cup in her hand. “I will wash it later. It’s no problem, I’ll take care of it.”

“Sorry,” Jim said.

“He is always like this,” Evan said, and flashed a broad grin.

So then we were all settled again and Jim continued. “You know Mei-Hwa had a lot of involvement in the sort of reform movement we had. White Lilly it was called. Democratic movement. You have heard of it?”

“Yes,” I said.

Then Pei-Wen put in, “But it had more to do than just changing the corrupt government.”

“Yes,” Jim said.

“Definitely,” Evan added. “Many things.” He nodded gravely. “What is Taiwan going to be? That was ten years ago. Now…where are we?”

“So,” Pei-Wen said. She was trying to think of something. She closed her eyes, her hands folded in her lap, “Very very very important,” she said. “Bad tendencies in Taiwan culture.”

“Yes,” Evan said.

“So she learned of this and then worse things which came from that.”

“Human trafficking. Let’s just put it out there,” Jim said and extended his other hand toward the middle of the room.

“So then she learned of the trafficked girls and she became –” Evan said.

“You know how she is. Always goes maximum, takes charge. I think you know,” Pei-Wen said.

“Yes ok,” I said.

“So she was part of a group.”

“She founded it, she got it going. I don’t know –” Jim said.

“Yes yes,” Evan confirmed.

“How she did it –”

“Had to be secret,” Jim said.

“Why secret?”

“Many different reasons,” Evan said. “It was still martial law time.”

“Spies, informers, criminals,” Jim added.

“Some maybe not criminals but not understand different things.”

“But her teacher was part of this.”

“Like a guide.”

“Linn. He was her teacher then,” Pei-Wen explained.

“And maybe she got wariness of police from him,” Jim said.

“He’d been arrested various times for political,” Evan said.

“So at one point she led this rescue,” Pei-Wen said, something strange in her voice.

“Rescue?”

“Yes. They were going to steal the girls who were trafficked,” Jim said.

“As you may know, the hotels in Taipei all rent rooms by the hour. Right? Very convenient,” Pei-Wen said, with a note of disdain unusual for her.

“*Sho shi*, they call it. ‘Take a rest.’” Both Jim and Evan chuckled at this.

“Well, I don’t think it’s funny,” Pei-Wen said.

“Ok fine,” Evan said by way of apology. Jim looked at the floor. “It’s true,” he said. “Tragic things happen sometime. Why we are here?” he said, opening both hands as though letting a large object drop to the floor, though somehow silently. “So what they don’t tell you,” Pei-Wen said, “is that these hotels have whole groups of trafficked girls living right there on the premises. Very convenient,” and she gave a little sniff. Her disgust with

the whole thing was obvious. And perhaps a certain weariness and discouragement.

“So,” Jim began, “one night, she and her group – they had information – they drove to one of these hotels.

“I was with them. I remember,” Pei-Wen said.

It was dark now outside. I had turned the lights on in the room and veils of cigarette smoke hung in fine wisps and feather shapes in the lamplight. “And I remember it was a rainy night, cold, it was the winter. Stacy, you met her,” Pei-Wen said and tilted her head toward me as though to remind. “Yes,” I said. “Yes, so she was driving. We had to go in this zig zag pattern down these alleys not to be followed, then on the corner were these two.” Both Jim and Evan smiled, but for whatever reason Pei-Wen didn’t acknowledge or even look at them. “We had to be snuck in through this back entrance where they take delivery of groceries, things like that. We had helpers in the workers. They led us through these back passageways. We had to go very quick, and then a woman opened a door – she just looked out through the narrow slice of light with one eye, I will never forget. She was so afraid, you could see it.”

“Yes, you know what they do sometimes,” Jim said, “these gangs that bring the girls in from China, from Viet Nam, on boat and if they see the Taiwan coast guard is following, they –” Here he looked down at the floor and did not look up for several seconds. Evan stared off at the wall.

“They take all the girls,” Pei-Wen said, “and they throw them into the sea. And their bodies wash up later on the western shore. This has actually happened.”

“Snake head gang, they call them.”

“So that’s why she was so afraid,” Evan said.

“So we went in very quickly. It was a suite of some kind.”

“Very fancy,” Jim said.

“There were three girls, like the ones you saw. They were dressed in all dark clothes each could take only one small bag. So then quickly we

went out. It was very windy out, a storm was coming, the car seemed to tremble with the wind hitting it. The streets were deserted. We had to go in the same complicated pattern, but then we got to the special apartment. Mei-Hwa had rented it. She used her own money. We got them out, they were all crying. They got down on their knees on the parking lot thanking us, we had to pull them up. Mei-Hwa was talking to them, trying to calm them down. We bundled them into the entryway and pushed them up the stairs. But then as we were doing that, a car speeded in behind where we were parked and three men got out. We made the girls run up the three flights of stairs. Stacey and I were going to stay behind to see who it was. But then –" She broke off here and seemed to be swallowing hard.

"We knew who it was," Evan said. "We could not have our regulation, you know, guns with us."

"So we made sure the women got into the apartment," Jim said, "and we stayed in the stair well, but they were four, we only two. We pushed them back, we both had knives but didn't want to use them, just scare them off, make them move back. But they were very fast and strong."

"I was so preoccupied. We both Mei-Hwa and I forgot to lock the door. Mei-Hwa rushed toward it, but he was already there, then Jim came and grabbed him and Mei-Hwa flung herself on him, but he pushed her back and she fell against a small table and she was hurt and lay there on her side."

"I don't know how it happened," Jim said, "Evan was holding off the two in the stairs. I had a grip on him, but he threw me into the wall and grabbed the nearest girl. He tried to drag her out, but I held her back somehow –" He paused for a second.

"It was all so confused," Pei-Wen said.

"We were police officers. But it was secret. Had to be careful what we did. Anyway. He all of a sudden had a knife and he slashed her twice across the face like an x."

"He just wanted to ruin her beauty," Pei-Wen said. "That's probably how he thought of it."

“So then I was able to punch him in the –” he patted his own midsection to indicate where, “and grab him and throw him down the stairs. Evan had already beat up both the others. He has very good gung fu. I am mostly firearm guy.” Evan gave a little wave by opening both hands. “Mei-Hwa lay there on the floor crying. We had to try to make some bandages for the girl’s face. When Mei-Hwa stood up and saw her lying there bleeding and screaming, she ran around frantically looking for bandages. She had an expensive blouse on, very fine material. She tore it off and made us use kitchen knives to cut strips and wrap her face the best we could, then we knew it would take the ambulance too long. So we carried her down to the car and the other two came. We brought them to the nearest hospital. At the hospital he made some phone calls.” She nodded toward Jim. “Mei-Hwa was pacing back and forth. They had to give her a sedative. She sat there, I remember, looking out at the driveway of the emergency room entrance, just staring. Sitting in this little white plastic chair. I really have felt she was different from that day on.”

“I don’t know how we didn’t see those guys following us,” Jim said.

There was suddenly a sense of awkwardness, almost embarrassment. And so, after a little while the two cops, Jim and Evan, took their leave, but Pei-Wen stayed behind, explaining that she would get a cab back by herself.

“Were you angry at them?” I asked.

“Tonight?”

“Well, I mean after the event.”

“No, no.” She shook her head. “They did their best.”

“How did you or Mei-Hwa get them to be involved?”

“I don’t know everything she did. She tells me only so much.”

“Yes.”

“That’s how she is.”

“Yes, I know,” I said. And we both laughed a little.

“She’d been making connections, consulting people. Stacey was very involved, some others….”

"You?"

"To a degree. I tried to stay out of it at first. Maye that was a mistake. Our relationship was strained for a while," she said as she pulled her sleeve down more across her wrist "Anyway, they somehow contacted different doctors who had treated girls for venereal infections, and… you know –" She looked away for a moment. "– gynecological injuries, and I guess they put her in touch with certain trustworthy persons in the police."

"Do the police look the other way usually?"

"Yes. Actually, the police are good in some ways. With the horrors of the trafficking that you heard about, they go after those men. And when they catch some of the girls, they don't just arrest them, they help them. They give them new identities, real employment…whatever help they need. But yes, they look the other way too as the business is going on at the hotels."

"Don't tell her that we came here," she said suddenly.

"Yes, all right."

"Was she involved with Linn?" I asked. There was a slight flash of near-alarm in her eyes. "No," she said. "But he had a strong influence on her thinking. I'm not sure for the better." Something in her manner made me not press the point. "There are many lies spread about him. Perhaps you've heard some, I don't know…"

"No, not really," I said.

"Yes. Good."

"Did she try to commit suicide or something like that," I asked.

"No, she had some serious problems, but not that. I think she's much better now."

We sat there in silence for a moment and then something unexpected happened. She asked me if she could stay overnight. It was very late now, and she didn't like the idea of going all the way back by herself.

"And she's probably not there."

"Where is she?" I asked.

"She's working."

"Yes, of course."

"I just feel strange sometimes being there by myself."

"You stay there often?"

"Yes, sometimes. So is it all right?"

"Of course," I said.

"I'll sleep out here on the couch and you can sleep in there," I said, meaning the bedroom. But she wouldn't hear of it, so she stayed the night on my couch. When I got up the next morning, she was already gone. There was a neatly written polite thank you note left on the kitchen counter. As I showered and got dressed, I wondered how much of what I'd been told Professor Kate knew about.

CHAPTER 16

The next day I was in my office in the afternoon, going over papers and planning classes and the like. On my desk there was a bookmark that Frances had given me, the tall willowy young woman who always reminded me of a Modigliani. It was covered with a decorative pattern of lilies, and I was reminded of the political movement called White Lilly that had brought in the first democratic government in the entire Chinese-speaking world. At the top of the bookmark was a character that translates as Peace. And there was a park in Taipei called Da Ahn – 'great peace.' Would there be a great

peace? What would happen? Then the office phone rang. I wondered for a moment who it might be. But then her voice was in my ear.

"How are you, what are you doing?"

"I'm ok. How are you?"

"I'm good," she chirped back.

"We were wondering where you went."

There was a bit of a pause. "I had to do something for my work," she said. Something in her voice made me decide not to press the issue.

"Shall we have dinner this evening?"

"Ok. Where?"

"I will come to your place. I'll bring some things."

"Bien dan?"

"Yes, lunch boxes. You know – my favorite," she laughed.

"All right, what time?"

"Not too late."

"Did you see Pei-Wen when I was gone?"

"No."

"No?"

"No, not really," I said. "They drove me back, but that was it."

"Ok," she said.

"Why?" I said.

"Nothing, no reason. Just don't want you to be just…alone by yourself…if I'm not there."

"I see," I said. "Well, that's ok. So – what time?"

"I'm not sure. I'll call you later, let you know."

"Ok. That's fine."

In the darkness there was an amber cone shape and a parallelogram of dim yellow. It was a lampshade on the other side of the bedroom, and past the door and through the living room and the entrance to the kitchen, a small light was on. I had fallen asleep after getting back to my place. The insomnia which had disappeared for a while had come back and I

sometimes found myself dropping off in the early evening. And then she was late as usual. I got up and washed up a bit and while I was doing that the bell rang. I buzzed her up and opened the door for her. She stepped in with a big smile tilting her head to the side. She was carrying a large plastic bag against her chest.

“I brought two lunch boxes,” she said. She tilted her head again, wanting me to smile, but I was still wondering where she had been all that time and why she had run off. I took the package from her, and we went into the kitchen and sat down. She made some tea for us before we started to eat.

“Gao Shan tea, I like that. Where did you get it?” She held up the dark green and orange foil package.

“One of my students.”

“Hmm,” she sniffed appreciatively.

“Your students love you.”

“I’m a good teacher.”

“Where did you go,” I said.

“I had to do things for my work.”

“What work?”

“Well, you know, I’m writing different things. Always writing, writing…” she said, smiling into her teacup. Then she slid a sly glance at me, shaking her head. “You know…I told you, something about the fishermen, something about the native people, and then…what you saw.” She set her cup down. “The trafficking.”

“Lots of stuff,” I said. “Are you leaving enough time for your own work?”

“All that is my work.”

“You know what I mean. Your novels.”

“Yes, I’m writing another one. I don’t like to talk about it. I’m really hungry,” she said and began opening the two plastic shells. “So…it’s about my childhood. Not a very original subject. But I have to deal with it.

Growing up in Tien Mu, fancy place –" She made a little flutter with the fingers of one hand as though to say la-di-da. "Lots a rich people living there. My father, I think I told you."

"No, you never did."

"A doctor. Very successful. Very smart. Very kind. Always busy. My mother. Very, sort of…driven. *Through me,"* she emphasized. "She always was like, have to excel. Be the best. Be a star. Didn't really care what. Just the best. Excel, excel. But I didn't go to Tai Da, the big university. The best. I went to an arts university. Not famous. They call that wild chicken."

"Wild chicken?"

"Yes," she laughed. "That's what they call a – you know – not very elite school. I know, funny term. She was amazing."

"Was?"

"Yes, they're both gone." She was silent for a moment. "She was so intense. Do this, do that. More more, push push." She made a ring with both hands like strangling something. "So I just have to…write write, report report. I don't know…." She broke off, looking down at the table. The overhead light made a semi-circle of ivory light on the green wooden table. "There's always so much to do. I get up in the morning, I'm just –" she raised both hands near her ears and gave her head a little shiver. "What to do first? This story, that story," she made the same ring with both hands like before as though strangling each. She saw that I noticed and that I couldn't help smiling. "Making fun of me," she swatted my arm with brushy fingertips.

"No, I'm not."

"Hmmm," she smiled, as she sometimes did, looking down, her lower lip tightened a little. We sat there eating. There were breaded mushrooms, long and knotty looking. *Mi fen* with bits of gold egg yolk and carrot slivers. Purple and slightly brown-crusted breaded yarrow slices, a couple of boiled eggs, light brown in color. The tea had a nice warm smell.

“So did you see your teacher, Linn?” I asked. She didn’t say anything. But there was a change in her mood.

“So why do you ask me this?”

“I was just wondering.”

“Did Pei-Wen tell you this?”

“No. I was just wondering, I told you. You just ran out of there so fast.”

“I told you, I had to do work.”

“That doesn’t make any sense and you were gone for several days.”

She got up suddenly and it was as though she was looking for something she’d mislaid. “I have to go. You don’t care about my work, you don’t care about me. You have this jealousy or whatever it is –”

“I never said anything like that.”

“It’s what you’re thinking,” she said as she yanked one sleeve of her coat over an arm extended as though she were warding something off.

“That’s crazy.”

“No it’s not.”

I had followed her into the living room, but now she walked quickly back into the kitchen. “Here,” she said as she shoved the two plastic shells roughly to the other end of the table. “You can have that.”

“Why are you acting like this?”

“I’m mad, ok? Always – your suspicion. I introduce you to different people, and you think they are all men I’ve slept with. That’s what you think!”

“I never said that.”

“It’s what you think. I can tell. I’m going now.”

“Fine.”

“Yes, all right. Fine.”

And with that she walked out the door slamming it behind her. I went back into the kitchen and put the two lunch boxes in the refrigerator and, after a while, went to bed. Lying there in the dark, I was wondering if I

wanted to see her anymore. I loved her so much. She was unique, multifaceted, brilliant, dedicated, beautiful. But aside from being puzzled by her strange temperamental nature, I also wondered once again what she was leading me into, perhaps even unconsciously. Why was she showing me the things that she was? Was she even aware of her intentions? Several days went by and I was actually relieved to not be seeing her during that time, but then, inevitably, I began to miss her. I missed her a great deal, I couldn't help it. One evening, as soon as I got in and the emptiness and silence of the apartment struck me so sharply, I broke down and decided to call her. But as soon as I was about to pick up the phone, it rang. It was her.

"Hi how are you?" she said. "What have you been doing? I just wanted to say I'm sorry that I was so…temperamental."

"That's ok."

"Is it all right if I come over?"

"Yes, sure."

"I miss you."

"I miss you too."

Then she began laughing. "I'm not good at staying mad at you." I laughed a little myself. "I'm not good at staying mad at you either." So before long she was at my door and shortly after that we were lying in my bed. And her fingertips were playing up and down my chest and abdomen as though she were a harpist touching the strings very softly. "Did you miss me?"

"Yes. You know."

"Hmmm," she whispered. "I missed you too. I'm sorry that I get so…I don't know what's wrong with me, *lao shu*." She sometimes called me that as a teasing joke. She would say it and smile her slightly crooked smile and tilt her head as though questioning. That was when I noticed most the beauty mark at the corner of her mouth and the tiny sprinkle of freckles on her cheeks, thought by the Chinese to be a flaw.

"Oh I have to tell you…"

“What?” I said.

“Stop for a second,” she said giggling, and she squirmed away. “Come on –”

“All right, all right…”

“It’s bad news, I told you.”

“What is it?” I said.

“Well you remember the girl Stacey? You met her at the Blue Note that time.”

“Ok.”

“Yes, well her boyfriend, he is a Canadian guy. Very nice person. He teaches English at a cram school. But he got very sick. No one knows what it is. But he is very sick. In the hospital. They’re very afraid. So…she really needs support. So I want to go visit them in the hospital. He’s conscious sometimes but sometimes not. But she’s there all the time. Will you come with me?”

“Sure. When?”

“Tomorrow. Is that all right?”

“Yes, I have time.”

“Ok, good.”

She played her harp strings again. The bedside lamp was on low, its semi-circle of light across her bare breasts, and we kissed, and once again certain things were then exchanged.

CHAPTER 17

She picked me up the next day in the early afternoon and we drove out to a hospital that was located in the extreme southeast of the city. We had to park somewhat far from the entrance and as we walked through the parking lot we were struck by the beautiful weather – a high light blue sky with a breeze sweeping cumuli along toward the sea. Inside we were met by Stacey at the desk and she spoke to the nurse in charge and we were cleared to go up to the second floor where his room was. It was a small private room with windows along one wall and some chairs there. He was lying in bed. There was an oxygen mask attached to his face with white ties like shoelaces. A curved plastic hose in the mask was for oxygen, but you couldn't tell whether he was breathing or not. He had on a blue hospital gown that was partly open and electrodes were attached to his chest. His head was turned a bit to the side. He didn't move at all.

Stacey was quiet, and seemed to be holding herself inwardly, her elbows close to her sides, hands clasped before her, as though she had a pain in her stomach. Sometimes she adjusted the bedclothes around him or brushed his hair lightly.

“Thank you for coming,” she said to me.

“Sure, of course.”

Then she and Mei-Hwa went out into the hall. I sat there by myself. The sun was bright and warm through the windows. Then the two of them came back. Mei-Hwa and I sat in the two chairs near the window. She reached for my hand and held it the whole time. Stacey sat at the edge of the bed. They attempted small talk, but their heart wasn’t in it. And after a while they fell silent. A nurse came in and said something to Stacey and then examined him, taking blood pressure, listening to his chest, looking through his chart. Her expression was neutral. She said nothing. Then she left. There were some more attempts at small talk, Mei-Hwa holding my hand the whole time. Then she got up and we went through a brief ritual of taking our leave, and then we left. Outside it was still the same beautiful day. When we got back to the car and got in, I couldn’t help myself, and as she was starting up the car I stopped her and pulled her to me and covered her face with one kiss after another and held her as tight against my chest as I could and then kissed her some more, and she lay against me, her face turned up to me, her eyes closed, and I kissed her some more, not wanting to stop, wanting never to stop, and I knew then that we would get married. Whatever the difficulties might be, it would be worth it. We would always be together. But even as I knew this, I also knew there was a larger problem. How could I stay, if I couldn’t get a more solid and clear situation? But there seemed to be forces which I did not understand working against that, for reasons that I didn’t know. It was as though she could sense what I was thinking, and she opened her eyes and looked at me and laced her fingers with mine. Then the mood – so intense, so profound – that had passed between us was over, and she started the car and we drove back.

The next evening my doorbell rang unexpectedly. I was in the process of clearing up after dinner. It was early evening and dark out already, as always. One had to get used to the sudden fall of night in these latitudes; at times it was in its own way enchanting, at others it was one thing further to press upon one's nerves. Answering the door, I was surprised to see it was Brit.

"Ok I come in?" she said, standing in the doorway. She had on tight black pants, black spike heels, a leather jacket that looked expensive – but then everything she wore looked expensive – and underneath it a black turtleneck.

"Ok."

She stepped in with a certain air. But then that left her, and it was as if a campy joke had been suddenly dropped in the face of some pressing business.

"Sit down?"

"Ok, thank you." She took a seat on the couch, and I sat in a chair opposite.

"Would you like some tea?"

"No, no thank you. Well you have a colleague, I think a professor Kate." She drew off her jacket and for an instant she seemed to be drawing a bow and arrow. Then she folded it in her lap. "Yes?" she inquired.

"Yes, sure."

"Yes. So…did you ever notice how Mei-Hwa reacts whenever she is mentioned?"

I did recall one or two instances – one a small get-together at Mei-Hwa's place with Pei-Wen and Stacey, another time at Brit's restaurant where Mei-Hwa and I were having dinner and several of her theater friends came over to talk.

"Yes," I said. "But why do you mention this?"

"Well, I just think you should know something about it, the story. So she is a theater person – director, actor – your friend. And Mei-Hwa she still

does that too. Writer. And I am too, you know –" She made a little corkscrewing movement with one hand, "– an actor, actress…whatever…." She was strangely self-deprecating at times, I had come to realize.

"And so, I was right there at those times. Firsthand, you know? So Mei-Hwa and this Kate, they had a very special connection."

"Ok."

"Yes," she smiled and nodded. "And so they did many things together. She was trying to be an actor then. She really wanted to act. And this Kate was coaching her, helping her. They were together for a while all the time. They wrote things together. Strange situation, relationship. Mei-Hwa was very young, woman much older, as you know."

"But then after a while something change. I remember once we had rehearsal in this old space we had, you haven't seen. And I came in. Normally they would both already be there. That night, just her. And she is crouched down on the floor near some props we had on this table. She is sitting on the floor under the table, crying and crying, the tears running down, falling onto the floor. She couldn't work, couldn't think straight, write nothing, not even get out of bed. We had to take care of her. Then I don't know how it happened. When no one was looking she took big big big overdose of tranquilizers. And drank half a bottle of brandy, don't know where she got it. Got so sick, we had to rush to hospital. They pump her stomach, put her on oxygen. She was very very sick. Didn't die but still very sick. Her, at that time, roommate was former lover – girl. Ok? But then was just looking after her – her, you know, her mental health."

"So then she change a lot. All of a sudden, likes men. Really a lot. So then she is considered damaged goods, ok? by any Taiwan man, Chinese man. They take one look, they know. Ok? They say, yeah maybe nice for date, marriage – no. This how they think, how they are. Ok? So naturally she wants you. You're handsome guy. Professor – smart, nice. Maybe big cock too – heh heh – let me see.

"Come on, Brit," I said and guided her hands away.

“Let me see.”

“Come on, come on.”

“Ok, fine. You are faithful. Very good. Well anyway,” she said and sat back down on the couch but only to gather up her coat and put it on. “So they want me to invite you to the performance tomorrow night. You remember, she took you to the rehearsal with Ahn Chi the dancer and her group. So they are having the performance tomorrow night. Ok?”

“Yes ok,” I said, as, with a sort vamp-like manner she got up, gave my hand a squeeze –
how soft and warm her hand was – and let herself out the door.

The performance the next night was at a black box space inside the National Theatre complex. Pei-Wen and Jim and Evan picked me up and we drove over through the dense evening traffic. I was a little surprised to see that Jim and Evan were there. I wouldn’t have thought that it was their type of thing. “Hey,” they both said almost in unison as I got into the back seat. Jim was driving, Evan sat opposite. Pei-Wen was beside me. She seemed preoccupied and looked out the window most of the time. Because of traffic it took nearly 40 minutes to get there.

“Taipei traffic, you know,” Jim said. “ugh, terrible.”

Then we were out and going through the parking lot. We made our way through the corridor and into the small theater space which was quite crowded. Mei-Hwa was already there waiting for us and raised her hand and smiled. Pei-Wen waved back and we went over to her where she sat in the second row on the right. She seemed a bit nervous.

“This is where I find out if I can write this type of thing,” she said, “you know – theatrical –” and she raised both hands in a gesture, as though she were opening a curtain with both hands, ta daa.

“Well you’re theatrical,” I said teasing her. She smiled back. “Oh really?”

“Yes really.”

After a few moments everyone had their seats. It was a quiet respectful crowd and there was an air of expectancy. What is this going to be? they all seemed to be thinking. The performance itself was just as the rehearsal had been – elegant, precise, beautifully controlled. Ahn Chi was masterful as an archetypal woman and yet a goddess who was both eastern and western in subtle ways, a sinuous stylization: a discrete containment suggesting the former, an energetic extraversion the latter. The other dancers were equally subtle, a chorus of water spirits, earth spirits, fire spirits, and air spirits, circulating, creating the living changing backdrop, both human and cosmic, for Ahn Chi's transformations as she conquered both death and rebirth. The music was likewise a blend of east and west and alternatingly lyrical and dramatic; silences too were allowed to speak, when the dancers would pause – still, expectant. Mei-Hwa's text had been chosen with great intelligence – mostly in Mandarin but there were foreign words and phrases – some English, some Japanese, some French, some German, ringing surprisingly in the Chinese context. It went on for nearly an hour in a single movement. The applause was loud and enthusiastic. People really responded to its unique vision.

"Do you think they liked it?" Mei-Hwa asked me, twisting herself around and speaking into my ear.

"Yes, of course they liked it. Didn't you hear all the applause?"

"Well, maybe," she said. Then she smiled in a self-deprecating way.

"So it was great!" Brit said, throwing up both her hands, like tossing two balls at once. Then she flung both arms around Mei-Hwa and gave her a bear hug. Mei-Hwa murmured something in Chinese and giggled into her shoulder as she struggled free. Pei-Wen, Evan, and Jim stood around smiling.

"Well so we have a little reception over at the restaurant," Brit said. "Ok? So everybody come."

"Who will be there?" Pei-Wen asked.

“Oh everybody, they are scattered all around,” Brit said sweeping a hand over the crowd that was already dispersing. “And some others too.” Pei-Wen nodded but seemed thoughtful and subdued as indeed she had been all evening.

When we got to Brit’s restaurant I was surprised at its size, having only seen its back rooms before. There was a bar and people were ordering drinks. There were more than I had expected and many I didn’t recognize. Brit had invited all her friends from the theater, music, and media worlds, and the atmosphere was a bit like an art gallery opening of the avant-garde sort. Much dressing in black – that sort of thing. There was a rather modest buffet at 90 degrees from the bar, but it was clear that the emphasis was on drinking rather than eating. There were about a hundred people all together, milling about in the center of the room, floating over to the bar for another drink or picking at the buffet. Cigarette smoke filmed the air. There were circular tables set in the middle of the room and small clusters sat there talking, smoking, leaning in toward each other as though exchanging confidences or throwing themselves back against their seat in laughter. Jazz was piped in though it was half drowned out by the loud talking. Brit was moving from table to table, checking on people, sometimes introducing one person to another, a green bottle of beer in one hand, cigarette in the other. Mei-Hwa went off to talk to the performers who were seated together at a table over near the buffet. Pei-Wen, Jim, Evan and I were at a table on the other side of the room. I decided to get a drink from the bar and got up and made my way over. From the corner of my eye, I noticed someone moving toward me and then felt a hard grip on my jacket and – then an arm coming toward my face – which I was just quick enough to block. Jim and Evan were there already and restrained the attacker. There was cursing – I could only pick out bits and pieces and a kind of rapid question and answer. Evan held the man in a lock with his face almost on the floor while Jim spoke to him in slashing low guttural phrases, getting little real information. I asked Evan to let him up and he did. Jim stepped partly between us out of precaution. I

asked him what his intent was. He spoke in rapid Taiwanese and Evan who was fluent in it translated. “He says that he does not like foreigners who try to interfere in Taiwan affairs.”

“Ask him why he thinks I’m doing that.”

“He says that’s what half the foreigners here are doing. He says he thinks you are trying to do something to someone who is important.”

“Do you want to press charges?” Jim asked.

“For what?”

“Attempted assault. Maybe something else…”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Ok.”

By this point Brit had come rushing over, waving her arms around and swearing. There was a quick exchange between her and Jim. She evidently wanted to press some sort of charge, but Jim seemed to dissuade her and she contented herself with merely having the would-be assailant ejected. A few moments later Mei-Hwa appeared at my side looking concerned, patting me up and down. I found this a bit amusing. It was as if she were confirming that different parts of me were real – arm, shoulder, back of neck, one hip, other arm.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes, sure.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m ok. The performance was wonderful. Your text worked perfectly.” She beamed at hearing this and then said, “Well I’m sorry that the evening had to include this. Was he nuts or something?” At this she extended her attention to the others. Evan and Jim gave minimal shrugs. Pei-Wen seemed concerned and said, “I think he was just drunk and wanting to start some kind of trouble.”

“Who was he?” Mei-Hwa asked.

“We don’t know,” Brit said and gave a flick of her cigarette and the back of that hand in the direction of the door. “Just some jerk. Don’t even know how he got in, maybe look for free drinks.”

“Oh ok,” Mei-Hwa said and shivered her nose in amused puzzlement. Then she gave my arm another squeeze. “I have to go over and talk to some people ok?”

“Sure,” I said. And she disappeared back into the crowd which now was considerably larger. She and Brit exchanged brief words just out of hearing, then Brit came back and put her arm around Pei-Wen who seemed to tolerate this with a good grace. “Why don’t we sort of retreat to the back room ok? Getting kind of crowded,” Brit said. Pei-Wen smiled and silently agreed. “You know you can relax better.” I almost had the impression she was afraid that something else might happen, perhaps even a second attack. So then we all ended up being led into the kitchen and then down the same back hallway, this time by one of the cooks, and into the same back room.

So then we were all seated around the table – Pei-Wen, Jim, Evan and me. Brit had rushed off back to the party, after she brought in a tea service for us.

“Who was that, do you know?”

“No.”

“I think he is not someone who would be here normally,” Pei-Wen said.

“Why was he then?” I asked.

“Doing something for someone maybe.”

“What did he mean that I was trying to do something…how did you put it?” I asked Evan.

“Yes, he said someone important.”

“Do you talk to your colleague Linn very much?” Jim asked. This made me laugh out loud. “Ha! no. He never speaks to me, very unfriendly.”

“Well that’s too bad maybe,” Pei-Wen said. “We know about him. He is sort of well known. So….” She paused as though to emphasize the

seriousness of what she was going to say. “We wanted to ask you to come to another…visit that we have to make. With Mei-Hwa.”

“I see.”

There was a strange atmosphere suddenly. It was as though there was a kind of intimacy between us, and yet a tension as well, since it was an intimacy which was not entirely voluntary on our various parts and occasioned by something rather dire. “She has to do more interviews,” Pei-Wen went on. “You know it’s her big project. About…the women. Ok? I really hope you can be there.” She said this with a somewhat stern expression. Was there even a bit of a threat implied as well, I would later wonder. “Sure, of course,” I said. We sat in silence for a while. Pei-Wen poured tea for everyone and offered the pineapple cakes around with little pink napkins. It was a small white cup with a design of blue flowers around the rim. The tea was a clear yellow that seemed to match the light brown of the little cakes.

“It will be a different location this time,” Jim said. Evan said nothing and sipped his tea. Pei-Wen did as well, neither seemed to want to look at me. Jim smiled in his usual reassuring way.

“I see,” I said. “When would this be””

“We’ll have to get in touch with you later about that. We are not sure right now. Pretty soon.”

CHAPTER 18

For a couple of days, I had the leisure of taking care of classes, going back to my apartment by myself and spending the rest of the time haunting some of my favorite spots in Taipei. None of them were anything special or intended as tourist attractions. They were things that spoke to me of what I always felt in the city, the beautiful city, the striving working city, the enigmatic city, the romantic city in which so many precious stolen moments and secret trysts could blossom like flowers, rare and beautiful, in the mysterious subtropical night, the city whose time was either coming to be or slipping away as a thing of the past – which? – and I recalled watching the young women throw the prayer leaflets into the silver pails of fire – the tragic city perhaps, though I didn't like to think of it that way. How I love you, Taipei! But the foreigner always has much to learn.

The location turned out to be a gated apartment complex on the Dun Hua South Road, a wide boulevard with park-like medians with trees and wrought iron benches where people would sometimes sit, out past where it crosses the Ba Da Lu, with the Adventist Hospital on the left, and after several more blocks there was the complex – high black iron gates and spiky fences. A special code was needed to open the electronic lock device. I had to wonder how they acquired the code but said nothing. There was Pei-Wen, Jim and Evan as before, with Stacey too, and, arriving later in her own car, Mei-Hwa. We had been waiting for her in Jim's car. It was around 8 in the evening, the traffic still roaring on the densely travelled boulevard. It was like a river of light – granulated, opalescent – that ran in smeared beads

past the car's windows. There was a cold aerosol of rain in the cobalt air outside. Mei-Hwa finally arrived a half hour late. I could see that the others were annoyed. She was able to park her car on the street not far from ours. She got out in a hurry, waving, and ran toward us, her folder pressed to her chest.

"Sorry," she said, a bit out of breath.

"Mei guan xi," Jim said. "No problem," he repeated.

"It is over here," he said and motioned to the complex half a block away. No one spoke as we walked over. After the gate closed behind us, we were in a different world. It was the world of Privacy, something at times rather rare in the crowded city. There were carefully tended ornamental shrubs and flowering bushes, set amidst a precise lawn crisscrossed with stone walking paths. Then we passed the heavy glass doors that sealed off the street noise in a decisive way. The lobby was all metal surfaces agleam in a subdued light. It was as though one were standing in ginger ale. Jim pressed for the elevator and then we were stepping out onto the eleventh floor. The apartment door was like a heavy bronze gate with a polished large mahogany dowel attached to it vertically. It opened for us without our having to ring. It was Brit, and she motioned us in.

It was a large apartment – darkly polished floorboards led to an L of crème sofas with a black oval table between them. Beyond that was a bar area. There was a dimly lit hallway that seemed to suggest a suite of closed-off interiors, perhaps bedrooms. To the left of the bar there was an open area suggesting a large meeting place. This was entirely dark.

"Nice place, ha?" Brit tried to joke but her voice was low, and her manner seemed constrained. Jim and Evan sat on one of the sofas. Mei-Hwa and Pei-Wen sat on the other. Mei-Hwa smiled at me and motioned for me to sit beside her by patting the sofa cushion, letting her elegant hand rest on that spot. There was a slight tension in her posture. I was about to sit down near her when a woman I had never seen before appeared in the door of the dark room and switched the light on. She wore a long silk gown of a

soft crimson and stood there in the half-light for a moment regarding us, she resembled a curled-in rose petal in dimly luminous water.

Brit went to her and they spoke hurriedly to each other. Then Silk Dress walked quickly into the hallway and disappeared into one of the doors, emerged quickly, and opened another door someway farther down. Then she came back with several young women behind her. They came in and stood in the doorway next to her, in a row. None of them was Chinese. They were blond fair Caucasian girls. They would not look at us directly. They all wore gowns like that of their handler, as she seemed to be. One had a black gown darkly shimmery and with a pattern of red flowers near the shoulder. Another had a lime green gown with gold trim, and another all white with lacy fringe that reminded me, absurdly, of a slice of wedding cake with shredded coconut. Two other girls came out of the hallway. They were subdued and rather sullen as though they had been awakened from sleep. They were dressed in the same fancy way. Another middle-aged woman came in behind them. Unlike them, she was Chinese.

The idea was that Mei-Hwa could interview them in the large empty room, which we now could see had small tables and chairs that looked as though they had been acquired just for the purpose and set out in a rather utilitarian way. But Mei-Hwa didn’t like this idea and insisted on having each girl sit with us, so we rearranged ourselves to make room. Mei-Hwa sat on the opposite side of the L, with us crowded onto the other sofa. The girl in the black gown came first to sit beside her. She was hesitant, but Mei-Hwa made as many friendly gestures as she could think of to put her at ease. The Chinese woman sat with them and functioned as a translator, Mei-Hwa asking her questions in Chinese, the girl answering in some eastern European language – Russian? Polish? – I wasn’t sure. After a while the girl got up and the girl in the green dress sat down. Ms. White Dress was pacing nervously from the living room where we were back to the large empty room and then back to us. There was a pause in Green Dress’s narrative and the translator rose and seemed to be on the point of going into the other

room to get something when it happened. The girl in the white gown flung herself at Silk Dress, whom I had come to think of as a madame of some sort. She had that air of heartless elegance and cold-blooded ownership, though in her case this was softened by a flicker of good nature. Ms. White Dress tore at Silk Dress with both hands that gripped the other's gown fiercely, ripping it away from the woman's shoulder, exposing pale white skin near the armpit and the hollow of her collar bone. Then the younger woman – she was about 19 – smashed both cupped hands into her in a blind frenzy so that the older twisted away and covered her face and one ear to shield them. The translator leaped in between, and both Jim and Evan had as well, spinning the madame in one direction and Ms. White in the other. Evan checked the side of Madame's face while Jim kept the other in a strong but calming bear hug. She wept furiously in his arms, her face contorted and flushed. She flung what must have been obscenities at madame, who was bent over, her face in her hands. She too was crying with heavy convulsive breaths. Mei-Hwa leaped up and went to the girl in the white dress and ran her hands soothingly over her arms and shoulders and then cradled her face with both her hands, speaking into her ear. I wondered if the girl understood anything, but her expression changed. Then Mei-Hwa went over to where madame was just straightening up, attempting to regain her composure, while she drew the shreds of her dress's sleeve up around her bare shoulder. The two women interlaced the fingers of one hand, and Mei-Hwa helped madame hold up the sleave of her dress on the other side. Evan had stepped away from them to give them privacy. The translator led madame away down the hallway and the other sat down on the couch near me, closed off in her own thoughts, looking at the floor the whole time, her cornsilk hair hanging down over her face. Mei-Hwa came over and Pei-Wen, who had been stunned into immobility by the events, slid over to sit near the girl, holding her one hand while Mei-Hwa held the other. It was clear that they could not communicate in any common language, but they communicated, nonetheless. Evan and Jim both came

over and I rose to meet them, the three of us standing in the middle of the L-shaped couch area, wondering what to do. Then both Pei-Wen and Mei-Hwa came and spoke to us. They both wanted to stay there, perhaps overnight. We agreed and made our way to the door. But Mei-Hwa hooked my arm in hers and led me over to the side of the room out of earshot.

“I have to stay ok?”

“Of course, sure.”

“This is what I didn’t want to happen. It was very hard for us to arrange. I want to try to interview them all if I can.”

“The madame also? if that’s what she is.”

“Yes, her too,” she said, nodding to emphasize the point. “Jim and Evan will take you back. Ok?”

“Yes ok.”

“I’ll call you in a few days. I have a lot of work.” Then she kissed me lightly on the lips and gave my hand a squeeze. I was reminded of the way she patted my arm at the conclusion of our very first date. “I think they have something to talk to you about,” she added with a slight nod toward Evan and Jim where they waited near the door. There was something troubling her smile as she kissed me again and then turned to rejoin the other women.

In the car Evan drove while Jim sat in the back with me. It was a sort of role reversal, since till then Jim had always been the one driving. “This is not my car or his car,” he said, with a gesture of one long forearm slicing down like the hand of a clock.

“It’s company car,” Evan said, looking into the rear-view mirror.

“Heh,” Jim laughed. “Company. Very good company. Or very bad company. Who can say?”

“That was very strange back there. What you think?”

“Yah,” Evan said, “strange, everything strange.”

“Cannot predict. One thing I know.”

I was on the point of asking about the three girls, but something in their manner, and especially in their silences, told me not to.

“Was that Russian?” I asked.

“No. We had to figure out but turns out is Ukraine.”

The rain made an iridescent film on the windows, headlights of cars opposite sparkled through in a steady rhythm. I kept waiting for them to tell me whatever it was Mei-Hwa had been referring to, but they didn’t. Neither of them spoke as we made our way down through the dense traffic of the Chong Ching North Road. I said they could just let me out near the entry to the Shuanglien market.

“Are you sure? it’s raining.”

“Only a little,” I said.

“Ok.” And Evan stopped the car near the crosswalk at the market’s entrance. We said good night and I walked past the deserted stalls and over to my building a few blocks down.

CHAPTER 19

Morning. The light came through the blinds – violet water through black gills. I washed up, made tea for myself. A glance outside showed the weather was cool and windy, gray clouds in rugose layers low over the city but pushed along by the wind. I went down to a breakfast cart on the corner – *laubahn* with his dark green hoodie, a stub of cigarette in his mouth then tossed down for one purple flip flop to step on – "*Zao*,", he said with a slight nod, "*Zao ahn*" I said – and got a couple *shiao bing jia dan* – their flaky crusts slightly burnt and the warm fried egg inside. I ate it sitting on a stone bench in the crowded concourse, the paving stones underfoot with small clear puddles in their little fractures and pits, hundreds of people flowing past on their way to work. When I was done, I made my way to the MRT entrance at the other end of the concourse, passing the outdoor market stretching several blocks. Then the clean bright tunnels, the crowds threading through confused but purposeful – young girls in flocks, a teen-age guy sullen in his gray sweater and black track and field pants, a short, tough-looking veteran, his lined face with sepia complexion and his sudden smile when he sees me – and the glances that always followed the foreigner. Then, after some minutes, the bus station, and then the bus – two-storied, quiet; the slow careful nudging and barging through the heavy traffic; and then the highway and the landscape moving past – stone farmhouses, shrines, rice fields and fields of vegetables, all like a green fabric passing past one's gaze.

I got to my office and was going through papers, making notes for my lectures that afternoon. I was wondering why I actually saw so little of her sometimes. It was not a feeling of jealousy but more one of concern. Where did she go? Was it safe? There were shadowy recesses in our relationship that bothered me, especially since they seemed to suggest connections that went beyond the mere two of us. She had said she needed to go away on work, and I said all right. It was, I felt, a way of avoiding what one hoped would be unnecessary in any case. It was about ten minutes before my first class when the phone rang. It was Pei-Wen.

"Hello … Steve?"

"Yes."

"I was calling to ask you."

"I know," I said. There was a long pause.

"Yes, alright…"

"I understand," I said.

"Well…I was still wondering. And I needed to apologize, I felt, for –

"No that's ok."

"For that scene the other night."

"It's no problem."

"No, it is a problem. It really is." Her voice was different now. She did have different sides, as I had come to see.

"Can you meet us tonight?"

"Yes, all right," I said for some reason not bothering to ask who would be there.

"Where?"

"A place downtown. I'll give directions later. Around nine."

"Ok," I said. I felt she had more to say, so I had to gently interrupt her silence. "Pei-Wen I have to go to teach class now."

"Oh yes, of course. Sure. Of course, call me later when you're home."

"Yes, I will."

We said goodbye and arranged to meet. Then before leaving there was to my surprise a message from Dr. Gretchen. It read:

I hope that I can speak to you soon. This absurdity has to be cleared up.

That evening when I got back into town, I called Pei-Wen. She was in an even stranger mood than before – tense, with difficulty feigning the opposite, so I didn't press any issue. But I was puzzled, wondering what it was all about. After grabbing a cup of coffee and cleaning up a bit, I made my way to the place where she had arranged the meeting.

The address she gave me was on a side street off the Jong Shan North Road. The driver let me out near some parked cars. There was a light rain that made the sidewalk glisten. The place was a basement-level bar and night club. Down a flight of concrete stairs there was a heavy wooden door with ornamental glass squares set in it. Inside it was crowded and smoky. Across the room I saw Jim and Pei-Wen in a booth, deep in conversation, and Martin, the tall guy from the Blue Note, who stood and waved, his arm extended straight out like someone catching a ball tossed wide. He wore a silvery sport coat and pumpkin-colored turtleneck underneath. I wound my way through the bar crowd and the nearby tables. Martin stepped out for me to sit on the inside opposite Pei-Wen who was sitting with Jim. The booth had wooden bench seats and a rectangular wooden table. I noticed the grain in the wood and the knots in them that were like leopard spots. The only light was from cannisters that looked like small spotlights set at different points in the ceiling.

"Nice to see you again," Martin said as he sat down beside me. "We were maybe worried a little. But hey, you are here," he said with a motion of both arms like dropping something heavy.

"We were not worried," Pei-Wen corrected, mock stern, and then smiled at him as though they were sharing a private joke. She was smoking

and there was a glass of red wine in front of her. She wore a black vest and a crimson blouse underneath, open far enough to show the curve of both breasts. She blew smoke through her nostrils and looked around as though she were assessing the place. Always so quiet and careful, almost nun-like, now she was something else.

“What have you been doing lately?” Jim asked. He shrugged his shoulders under his tan overcoat as though to encourage.

“Nothing. Just working.”

“Are you having any strange problems there?” He looked at me and lowered his chin, interested, conciliatory, seeking a confidence. Martin looked straight ahead, rather still and straight backed. Pei-Wen took a long sip of wine and slid her eyes toward the table. I didn’t know what to say, wondering.

“Not really,” I said. Jim accepted this and smiled as though saying ‘good good’ silently.

“I think,” Pei-Wen started, “I think we were wondering about how it is between you and Professor Linn.”

“What about him?”

“Well, you know,” she blew smoke and then holding her cigarette in the v of two fingers and gesturing with both hands as though piling invisible goodies onto my invisible plate, “we want to know if there is a problem there.”

“Not really, we avoid each other. He seems strangely hostile, but I’m not aware of any particular problem.” They all nodded almost in unison.

“Well,” she went on, “some people felt there might be a problem.”

“Of what kind?”

“Linn,” Jim put in, breaking through the cobweb of indirection as though with a broom, “Linn is a politically prominent person. He has many enemies.”

“Controversial,” Martin put in suddenly.

“There are people who want to,” Pei-Wen said, and she searched for the words. She had the edge of both hands against the table, the cigarette still in one, and leaned forward as she spoke.

“To discredit him. With the public.”

“It has been something we have seen before,” Jim said.

“To set him up with that kind of –” Pei-Wen clarified for me.

“Smear,” Martin said. “Smear campaign.”

“With girls?”

“Yes,” Pei-Wen said. “You have seen it.”

“Those girls?” I must have seemed dense, but I was genuinely startled.

“No, but girls like them.”

“And our friend that we mentioned. He thought you were trying to do that.”

“I was trying to arrange…?”

“Yes,” Pei-Wen said.

“That’s crazy.”

I had almost laughed out loud at this. Then there were, at the periphery of my mind, images or the ghosts of images and the sense of a terrible darkness. But in another moment, this passed. Martin had disappeared, but now he came back with a bottle of beer for me. “I remember you like this kind.”

“Thank you.”

He smiled and sat down, a pleased host.

“Is this for real?”

“Yes,” Jim said. The demeanor of a police officer showing briefly through his affable manner.

“That is crazy,” I said. They were all looking at me, but it was as if they already knew the truth and just wanted to hear me say it. I did wonder why they needed this.

“He thought you might be trying to arrange that. Maybe you and some others.”

“No,” I said. And I thought of how I had been taken to see those girls. What was the reason for that?

“Why would anyone want to do that to him?”

“He has influence,” Pei-Wen explained. “And enemies too. Lots of friend, lots of enemies.”

“Taiwan way,” Evan said and nodded.

“He is always in the news.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Yes.”

“So they pay attention.”

“Who pays attention?”

She thought and seemed to swallow hard for a moment. “They pay attention to him, to what he is doing, and to what he is going through.”

Then Jim rescued her. “Do you know anyone at your school who would want to do this?”

“No,” I said. “No, I would have no idea.”

They seemed to accept this. The atmosphere changed, or at least there was a silent effort on all our parts to make it change, but this proved to be futile. Then there was a kind of invisible signal from Pei-Wen. And after a moment Jim and Martin started to prepare to leave. Then Pei-Wen and I were left alone.

“What do you think Mei-Hwa is doing?”

She set her cigarette down in the ashtray. Smoke came from her nostrils as she looked off toward the crowd. Then she came back to her wine and circled the last of it around in her glass.

“She is very busy. As you know. I’m so grateful how patient you are.”

“Is she safe?”

“Yes, she is always safe.”

“Are you sure?”

"Yes. What did Brit tell you?" She searched my face for signs. Perhaps my foreigner's face was an unknown code. And in an instant she glanced away.

"Nothing," I said.

"I see," she said. But in that acknowledgement there was a distance and a wariness.

CHAPTER 20

By this time Professor Guo had succeeded in arranging the fitness review that had been her objective for so long. It was her objective and who else's? I had to wonder. In the afternoon Dr. Gretchen came to see me. I heard her rather forceful rap on my door, and she stepped in quickly, her forehead lowered and her once-blond helmet of hair shivering a bit. It was something of a charge, it seemed.

"I just have to talk to you – just briefly – before we go in. Do you have a minute?"

"Yes, all right."

She sat down and rather slumped, both arms hanging heavily past her sides. Once again she wore one of her off-white cotton blouses, open far down enough to expose the bony expanse of her flat chest. The fingers of one hand played at her rather hacked up bangs, removing them from her eyes. She was absent, considering.

"Well, as I believe I have indicated, this entire thing is…*something* of an outrage. In my opinion."

"Well, I –"

She extended an arm, palm toward me, warding off imagined objections. "No, it's true, it's true. And if you ask me, it does have to do with an anti-American attitude that has run through this department from the beginning. And that Professor Linn is part of it. I'm sorry to say. Has your

girlfriend told you about him?" She looked at me as though to gauge my response. She and the chair she sat in were in a titled box of light striped through with broken shadows from the blinds. The day was sunny.

"She's not my girlfriend. Just a friend."

"I see. I was under the opposite impression. Others were as well, I think. For various reasons." She gave me a meaningful glance.

"Well, the connection between those two, I think, was always something of a can of worms. But we don't want to get into that. At least not now," she emphasized darting her face toward me, her eyebrows raised, eyes wide. Dust motes floated in the light, and it was as if she were suddenly electrified.

"Is Kate coming?"

"I think she must be, but she seemed rather vague – I wasn't sure if I had convinced her."

"So we're the American contingent?" I said, joking.

"Well, I don't know if I would put it that way," she said dismissively without looking at me. I recalled that she was a smoker, just like Kate, and she seemed to be looking about, searching for a cigarette.

"What time is it?"

I told her and "Oh," she said with a start. "It's time to go down there." And we both stood up and left.

The meeting was to be held in Guo's office. She was the chair and occupied a large office on the first floor. When we got there Gretchen asked me to wait outside for a minute or two. She wanted to talk just briefly with Guo in private. I stood there outside and noticed the large heavy door that had just been closed in my face. It was an imposing door of a sort of modernist style, though here it seemed to do the job of a castle gate. It was of a deep cherry with ripples in it like water currents mapped from above; there were javelin-like copper-colored handles. After a minute or two it opened and Guo stood there in the center, like a prelate inducting one into a sanctum. She was dressed in a black suit with a dark blue blouse and

silvery broach at the throat. She neither smiled nor spoke but indicated a direction with an extended hand as pale as a wax candle. Her face, it must be reported, was of a striking and somewhat fascinating ugliness: an almost abnormally wide mouth and large rather pop eyes. It was perhaps a thyroid problem of some sort, but the resemblance to a tree frog was cruelly unmistakable. I went in.

There was a large sofa of a light green color on one side of the room, right before some windows with beige curtains. Dr Guo took her seat behind her desk. Dr Gretchen took a place on the sofa right in the center. There were several chairs in the middle of the room arranged in an arc facing the sofa. I was about to take up one of them when Gretchen motioned for me to sit near her. I did so, positioning myself on its extreme edge. No one spoke for several moments; we seemed to be waiting for others to arrive. Then the door opened, and Kate stepped in. She was dressed a bit more formerly than usual. She didn't look at me when she came in but wore a brief minimal smile as she took her seat. Then the door opened a second time. It was the Assistant Dean. He gave the company a slight nod and took up a seat next to Kate. There remained one empty seat. Then Dr. Guo got up and came around her desk and sat down in it. After a brief pause, shuffling some papers in a folder in her lap, she started the proceeding. Dr. Gretchen had been mostly staring at the floor the whole time. Then she suddenly looked up as though she had been startled awake. "I would like to say," she said – and here she leaned a bit toward me and placed three fingers briefly on my knee – "that I think this is a rather extraordinary action on the part of the department."

"Well, if we may just proceed in an orderly manner," Guo said.

The Assistant Dean straightened himself a bit in his chair, fastening the button on his sport coat. Kate sat slightly hunched forward and avoided my glance.

"Yes of course," Gretchen said, nodding quickly.

"Very well."

“I think it is important that we look into matters of this kind…” the Dean said. “We need to ensure a positive experience for our students.” Guo looked at him and nodded. “Well in keeping with that,” Guo went on, “we see that there have been reports of your being under the influence of alcohol or…something, in some of your classes. What do you say to that?”

I was surprised at her directness and wondered briefly about the word ‘reports.’ “I would deny all that,” I said. “And what do you mean by “reports?”

“Yes, I was going to ask that,” Dr. Gretchen added.

Dr. Guo was brought up short for a moment. Then Kate put in “The students have many ways of communicating with each other,” she said. “I wouldn’t dismiss that lightly.”

“I wasn’t dismissing it,” Gretchen said

“No, I know that,” Kate replied.

The Assistant Dean adjusted an invisible box with both hands. “They have this bulletin board they use,” he said. Kate nodded and straightened up a bit.

“Well, the fact is there are these reports,” Dr. Guo said. “I wouldn’t dismiss them or call them mere rumors. I was concerned. And was wondering if there are adjustment problems as it were. We know you have been here for a year, but perhaps there are still certain issues.” She glanced down at her papers then back up at me, as though challenging. But I said nothing. I looked at Kate who responded, “Perhaps there are, you know.” Her hands were clasped in her lap and she pressed them forward, looking directly at me. “It can be difficult,” she said, “we know that.” She nodded as though urging me to agree.

“I don’t see any need for all this kind of thing,” Gretchen said. “We are not psychologists. And we should NOT be dealing in mere rumors!”

“I do not view them as rumors,” Dr. Guo shot back, suddenly energized. The Dean nodded but said nothing and pressed an index finger to his forehead as he leaned back against his chair.

“Well, I do,” Gretchen said, “I do.” She got up and then, raised to her full height, she swung out in an arc with the length of her arm – “This is all a complete violation of his rights!” She moved toward the door. “And I think it has to do with an anti-American attitude. Don’t deny. I’ve felt it all the time I’ve been here, which is now twenty years. Dr. Kate will confirm.”

“No I will not,” Kate said sharply.

“Well there have been times when you’ve said that.”

At this Kate stiffened but was silent. “And I think it has to do with Dr. Linn, your friend and perhaps that former student of his who has popped up lately. I thought he’d gotten rid of her.”

“I’m not aware of any of this,” Kate said, but in a subdued way.

“I think this is out of order,” Guo said. The Dean twisted around in his chair to face Gretchen who by this point was at the door. “I resent, I would say, this imputation of some sort of xenophobia,” he said.

“I would ask to have this case sent to the university committee,” Dr. Guo said with some satisfaction. The Dean agreed. “Yes, I think so,” he said. “That will have to be done.” By then Gretchen had already flung open the door and left. “Dr. Guo and the Dean looked at each other. Then he got up and left. Guo went back to her desk, and I took my leave.

CHAPTER 21

Rumors are a curious thing – invisible, insubstantial, intangible and because they are so – impossible to touch – they can touch anywhere; and though entirely abstract, they yet have such concrete effects, sometimes devastating. Certain parties were spreading rumors about me, malicious rumors that clearly suggested an attempt to do me harm. I had finally acknowledged it to myself, and I had to wonder why it had taken me so long. But who would do this? That night, working late at my office, I went out walking and wound up near the same side entrance as when I had gone to see Kate, when she had invited me to dinner. It seemed like ages ago. I went up the same narrow road as before, then turned off to take a different route which skirted the edge of the campus. Along the road, there were dense bamboo forests on the left, and to the right, bare minor escarpments of hill, some gradual, some steep, with no grass and with chunky outcroppings of rock and many *rong* trees, whose willowy yet densely intertwined branches hung down in dark eerie basketweaves. The night wind worked through the bamboo and made them tap and waver and click. There was a half-moon in the sky – very bright – and it flashed through the dark crowns of the *rong* trees. One thought of a silver coin tumbling around at the bottom of a basket. The darkness and the wind were full of suggestions. There were voices speaking. I knew I had to leave. It seemed as though, having come to this place with hopes of finding a life less – how should one put it? – not perfect, certainly, but less compromised, polluted even by… and the images that haunted my imagination flashed – these hopes met now with an ironic rejoinder. I walked to where there was a disused dormitory. A block-like structure of concrete amid a bare dirt clearing, unlit, the windows gone, empty holes where they had been. Built during martial law time, it stood there like a beached shipwreck. Wave after wave of tragedy had brought it here, receded, and left it. Had the waves of tragedy receded for good? But even if they had, they had left small dark

streams and rivulets in their place that perhaps had seeped into everything and continued, despite all opposition, on their dark destructive way.

How could I stay? But I could not stand the idea of going back.

Afternoon sun made a cone of light across the end of a sepia-colored leather sofa. Lu sat in a wicker armchair, a crème-colored cushion underneath him, a small cigar in the corner of his mouth, unlit. I never knew that he smoked cigars. I had sent him a message requesting a talk and he agreed, it seemed somewhat reluctantly. I arrived at his office door, which was completely closed, and knocked. After a moment his voice could be heard, coughing, and then, in a rather gruff way, he said to come in. I entered and found him sitting in his chair in the corner, preoccupied with what I could not guess. The cigar in the corner of his mouth pointing upward at a rather jaunty angle and then removed with three fingertips, and a slight lowering of his gaze.

“More problems with the money? Come in sit down,” he said, glancing at me only obliquely. I had the impression of being a nuisance, but I felt there was no choice. And so I just launched in. “I think that someone is spreading strange rumors about me.” Here he rose and adjusted the blinds, closing them partly. Then he went back to his chair.

“Oh yah,” he said

“I am trying to find out more –”

“No no,” he interrupted, “don’t try to do that. Not your business. You are foreigner. Your Chinese is…getting pretty good.” Here he could not suppress a smile. “Don’t do like what you did before, have students do things for you. That is very bad.”

“Yes, all right, but this is getting increasingly strange.”

“Sure, of course. But don’t –” here he whisked two hands back and forth. “Don’t overreact. That just make things worse.” His mood seemed to soften, and I felt encouraged to press forward. “It seems like it has something to do with Linn,” I said.

“Oh yah,” he said as though considering a difficult but familiar case. “Someone got some girl to say…something.”

“Is any of it true,” I asked.

“I do not think so,” he said, wagging his head looking down. “It is people who don’t like him in politics. Everything here is politics you know.”

“It’s as if some people think I’m trying to do something against him… or something.”

“No that’s crazy. Who would think that? what could you do?”

“I have no idea. But these are lies!”

“Yes, I’m sure. But calm down. What did they say at this meeting I heard about?”

“You knew about it?”

“Yes, but I couldn’t make it. I had to be in Hong Kong. Otherwise, I would have been there. But what they say? The dean was there?”

“The assistant dean. He said he would refer it to the university committee.”

“Ok, yah…which one. Never mind, probably personnel. This is nothing. They never do anything.” We sat there in silence for a moment. He seemed to be thinking. “Yaah, ok. I will help you with this. Sure. But you have to let me handle it, ok?” I somewhat reluctantly agreed to this, and then we took our leave of each other. When I left his office I decided to take a walk. There was a small lake in a remote part of the campus, and my steps seemed to guide me there. I stood there under some pine trees looking at the sunlight playing on the surface of the water. The sky was very blue and clear. I recalled that the island had once been called Formosa, from the Portuguese Illha Formosa, Beautiful Island.

CHAPTER 22

The next day I received a message from Mei-Hwa. John had had a cerebral hemorrhage and was in coma. The note was brief and yet full of distraught concern. Was it entirely because of this admittedly tragic event? “Where are you?” I had to ask. She seemed rather vague, saying merely that there were certain people who had to be “supported,” though she didn’t mention who they were. “We have to be supportive. There are many people very worried, upset. I have to try to help,” she wrote.

I had to reach out to others, asking what had happened and then asking where Mei-Hwa was and what she was doing. No one knew, or if they did, they concealed it in clouds of discrete polite friendly evasions. Or

perhaps it was I in my persistence, however softened by efforts at discretion, that was the thing to be remarked. Later I realized that I must have seemed the picture of an almost unsightly possessiveness, even jealousy, and they were reluctant to intrude upon such an exclusive region. Brit was a refreshing contrast. “She is probably fucking different men, ok? Just like I told you before.” I assumed she was drunk. “You are disrupting Mei-Hwa’s life. Her friends don’t like you, other people as well. They’re smiling when they talk to you, they hate you behind your back. But it seems like she is fixed on being with you, who knows why. It is very bad for her in many ways you don’t know. You are making her more sick. And no reason to give too much information.” She hung up before I could ask her to explain.

I went out later that night. It was raining and I pulled up my jacket collar as I walked along. The traffic seethed and blared, crammed confusedly along the Chong Ching North Road past the Shaunglien market, which was closed, the stalls empty, some with corrugated aluminum shutters pulled down. I hailed a cab and we merged into the Zhong Shan North Road and I told him where to go and he nodded. “Hao,” he acknowledged. I had decided to visit the same bar as before with Pei-Wen and Jim. He let me out at the curb. I paid him and he nodded somewhat gravely. “*Xie xie*,” he said with his gravelly voice. He pulled away. I went down the same concrete stairs and through the same door. Inside it was not crowded. I ordered a beer from a smiling woman in a peach-colored dress. I took a seat on the other side of the room. There was the same dim light. The same small tilted cannisters. I sat there drinking slowly, thinking. This was another of her disappearing times. It seemed a recurrent thing. I had the sense of activities going on around me, obscure, extensive, pressed forward by actors unseen and whose identities and whose connections with each other would surprise one a great deal. I thought of John and of the time we visited him in the hospital where he lay amid the white sheets of a narrow hospital bed, a rickety thing that looked like a cheap lawn chair, where he had been trying to distract himself by reading an old copy of Huckleberry

Finn, of all things – his quiet stoic tolerance of the whole situation. He was another westerner who had thought to find a new life here. Now what had happened to him? There was a kind of foreboding as I thought of it. After a bit, I walked around the neighborhood, up and down the Zhong Shan North Road, the cool night air refreshing me a bit.

When I got back, there was another email from her. I was surprised by the message. I
hadn't been expecting anything like that. John's condition had taken a sharp downturn, and now
he was beyond critical: "He has the brain death," Mei-Hwa wrote. The doctors were preparing to remove life support, but first they were contacting John's family back in Canada. I told her I understood the situation, and she wrote back that she appreciated that. I asked when I could see her again, and she said that she wasn't sure, but it would be soon. She missed me, she wrote, "incredibly." "I can't wait to see you again," she wrote. "I can't stand being away from you so long."

Perhaps it was some sort of immaturity on my part, but I did feel neglected and in a way discarded. I remember pacing from room to room in my apartment, my eye falling on the couch where she would often sit, perched bird-like on the edge. And then on the bed itself "her" side where she would be curled in deep sleep. Or on her back, without her clothes, hands on the pillow behind her head, as though dreaming, eyes closed, her legs spread. I missed her. I needed her. I busied myself with work to get it off my mind, but as I did, I felt increasingly frustrated and angry. I wanted my situation at the school to change. I was impatient to move things forward. I reached out to Pei-Wen, to ask her advice. Her initial reaction was non-committal and apologetic. But soon after that she called me, unexpectedly. Even more to my surprise, she said she had asked Brit and that she would help me.

"You need the right type of lawyer," Pei-Wen said. "If you are really serious about doing this."

"Yes, I'm serious. It would be an unusual thing to do, I assume," I said, perhaps feeling out her attitude. "I don't know," she said. "I think they sometimes have these kinds of things…disputes."

"She knows the right types of lawyers?"

"She knows one who might be able to help."

"How does she know him?"

"Her."

"Her."

"I'm not sure. Some of her political…activities."

"I see."

For several days I was waiting for Brit to call. But of course she didn't. I assumed it had to do with the situation with John. I learned later that, in fact, it did. And then, late one night, she called me.

"Hey, it's Brit, your new girlfriend, just kidding."

"I know who it is. How are you?"

"I'm fine, how are you? Busy."

Then she told me what she was busy with – John's "huge huge" funeral. "Big party, you know. His parents and his brother came. We had a big dim sum at my family our place, you know…" I had not been told about any of that. But I refrained from saying anything. I knew that she sensed what I was thinking. Mei-Hwa was ashamed of me. Or at least my presence might have created some kind of awkwardness. But for what exact reason I still had to wonder. I remembered a time when she and I attended one of the numerous arts functions that she was always dragging me to. Going down a flight of poured concrete steps, I misjudged the very last which was of a different height, stumbled, and ended up on the floor, to the alarm, chagrin, or amusement of the staring circle of people around me. I got up and got a beer and floated around the crowded hall, eventually finding myself in conversation with another American. Mei-Hwa seemed, from the other side of the room, as I could observe her, to be distanced, somewhat frozen. Amazingly she left the function without me. I was able to get a ride

back to my place with my American acquaintance. Later I received her irate phone call. I had embarrassed her – didn't I get it? "You loser!" she concluded and hung up. Then Brit broke the silence. We were in her car by then. We had been just driving around. "I think she has just been very busy. She had to arrange everything. You know?"

"Yes, sure," I acknowledged.

"Pei-Wen told me you wanted to see a lawyer to help…you know…"

"She did?"

"With your problems at the school. Yes. She did," she said, her eyes shining rather brightly. She raised herself in her seat and looked at me. "She called me. You asked her, right?"

"Yes, I did. I didn't know who else –"

"That's fine," she said, smiling, lowering her gaze, as though to soothe. "Of course," she tossed her head. "You are foreigner. Of course. You don't know. But you think it's a good idea?"

"I'm fed up."

"Yes," she said, looking at me, assessing, perhaps appreciating something, and continued meditatively. "Yes yes…" she said, looking down at the floor.

A couple days later she picked me up at the bus right as soon as I got in and we went over to the office of the lawyer who had been recommended. It was windy out and scraps of carboard from nearby vendor stalls flew about the bus station's parking lot and wind caught Brit's hair and made it stand almost straight out sideways when she stood up from the driver's side to wave 'over here' to me. Then she ducked back in quickly. "Hey," she said as I got in. "Wild out, hooo," she said as she patted and raked her hair back in place giving me a sidelong look as she did. "Are you all...right?

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Nervous?"

"Not really. Don't know what to expect."

“That’s natural. I think she will be good for you to talk to. You can’t just put up with things just on your own.”

“My grad students help me.”

“Yeah,” she said whisking her hand sideways. “That no good.” Then she put the car in gear and we drove off. Brit loved to drive. “It makes me feel free. And power!” And she raised one crooked arm to show her bicep. Clouds were pushed along in the sky. Trees by the road reached arms all in one direction. It was downtown, crowded with cars nose to fender and we parked in a cavernous parking garage and made our way up into the building’s lobby.

She looked through the directory on the wall near the elevator, pointing with one crimson-nailed finger. “Let’s see…” she said. And then, “Oh yeah, here.” Pointing to an address on the 11th floor.

“Have you worked with her before?” I asked. “Yes,” she said. But right then the doors opened and a small crowd flowed out and several people stepped in along with us. “Yes,” she said quietly looking down at the floor of the car. She seemed to want to discourage further inquiry and the presence of others so close gave her an excuse.

Ping-Feng Priscilla Liu was a labor attorney who had experience in a number of related areas, but I was not entirely clear what her interest in my situation might be. We spoke to a receptionist, but Ms. Liu came out to meet us. “Hello,” she said in unaccented English and led us into her office. She was a bit shorter than Brit, who was taller than most, and her figure was all generous curves filling out a subdued elegant dark blue suit. She wore black high heels and her hair reached to the middle of her shoulder blades. She took a seat at the end of a long couch that was set at a right angle to her desk and invited me to sit opposite. Brit took a chair nearby. Behind us was a picture window looking out onto the downtown skyline.

She pressed the fingertips of both hands together like two fans lightly touching, and looked at me, lowering her gaze before she spoke. “So you have been having some trouble where you work. The university. What has

been happening?" I went through the basic story step by step, hitting some important details. She listened carefully – her eyes widened at certain points. She seemed to be sympathizing with me, and I felt we had an understanding of each other. Then her office phone rang and she had to excuse herself. "I'm sorry…sorry," she said extending a hand as though to pat me and got up to answer it. It was something urgent and she had to leave for a moment. "I'll be right back. Please make yourself comfortable. I'm sorry for the interruption." And she hurried out in a way that made me think of a hen running across a yard.

"Well ok, see I knew she would be a good person for you,' Brit said. "I want to smoke…ugh," and she got up and stood near the window. "Come here."

"Come here what?" I said. She looked wonderful standing there in the light. It was the late light of the sun, leaning toward evening. Orange and mercurochrome light crystals shimmered through the dark buildings. She had something in her that was so beautiful. It was so different from Mei-Hwa whose inner beauty was fringed with something dark and enigmatic and troubled. I looked at her standing against the purpling Taipei skyline. In the distance was Taipei 101, the tallest building in the world, its silhouette magnificent and powerful in the fading light.

"See, look," she said and raised her arm as though lifting a curtain aside. "See? – tallest building in the world." She turned and gazed out at the skyline for several moments. Then she turned back. "I remember before. Everything was so different. Very poor, you know. Very very poor. And now – look! Yay!" She raised her arm, once again, like an impresario. Just then Ms. Liu came back with more apologies. "I was just pointing out the view," Brit said with a laugh. "Oh yes, it's great isn't it." Then Ms. Liu sat back down next to me on the couch, and Brit went back to her chair. Her tone darkened a bit, there was a sort of modulation in the whole meeting. Brit straightened herself in her seat. Bringing a suit against the university was possible, Ms. Liu went on, but it was complicated, and the results were

uncertain. To my astonishment she agreed to take the case on contingency – I had not mentioned this, and I realized that someone else must have broached the issue with her – but she warned that there could be serious consequences for my career. There was a pause and she looked at me, and then down briefly, almost as though she were embarrassed about something – and then she and Brit exchanged a glance that I could not interpret. Brit's expression registered the moment, and then she looked at me and, quite simply, smiled. Ms. Liu straightened herself and then moved back to the opposite end of the couch. She seemed to be collecting her thoughts, and, after a moment, she advised me to think about the matter a while longer and get back to her when I had decided. We rose and thanked her, and she and Brit embraced, something that took me by surprise, and I realized that they must have been rather close friends after all, something that surprised me even more.

When we left it was already dark and she wanted a drink and of course a cigarette. So we drove over to one of her customary places. "Normal kind of place. No big deal." It turned out to be a restaurant and bar, similar to that of her family but much smaller. We sat in a booth in a kind of lounge area near the bar. There were only a few customers. "Food not so good here. Well, is Cantonese so…some like, some don't. I know the people. Must be slow night – Hey hey! –" She broke off, waving in frantic cordiality to a middle-aged woman in a red silk dress daringly close fitting and of a sparkly shimmer. "Hellooo," she intoned, opening both hands toward Brit as though handing her an invisible shoe box. Then drawing up short, wrist on hip –

"What you have?"

"Oh you know." And they went back and forth in Cantonese for a minute. Then the owner passed by the bar and gave quick orders. Directly a Manhattan appeared on a server's tray along with bottle of Tsing Dao for me. "Better than Taiwan beer. Heard you drink that. Should move up in taste. You like this much better."

“So, you know…,” she drew on her cigarette, blew smoke and set it in the ashtray. “The whole democracy movement progressive all that…what can it do? More freedom, all that. Good,” She pushed both palm edges forward, the cigarette in one partial fist. “But it has too much …I don’t know….” She gave me a sly smile and inclined an ear. “Maybe some people involved they have strange ideas, maybe wrong ideas…maybe foreigner…”

“Really? Foreigners?”

“Maybe not… right here” she patted down the air in front of her. “But…around, I don’t know…maybe from outside.” She blew smoke up toward the light, her throat exposed. “On phone.” She put a fist beside her ear. “Computer.” And she twinkled her fingers on an air keyboard. “And you know you have to know how much sacrifice it is for Ping Feng to help you. Help foreign teacher sue the university. Very hard. She is going out on limb.” She pushed four fingers into a slot in the air.

“Yes I know,” I said.

“No, you don’t know. Not all.”

“Well, all right. Of course.”

“They want independence, those groups like your girlfriend.” She glanced at me and screwed her smile left right. Tick tock. “But what about the money? What about…living. One bomb – no electricity. One more – no water. Then what? They put ships around the island – no oil can come in. No power. No nothing. Then we sit here in the dark. Want water, have to dig well or something. Crazy. Democracy, freedom, culture – good. But money is first. You want culture, need money first. Then culture can come.”

“Don’t you want Taiwan to be itself?”

“Yeah sure. But make China angry – why?”

Just then she looked toward the other side of the room and raised one hand. A young woman appeared as though from around the corner. It was one of the undergraduates, Miss Ho. Then she ducked back around the corner and reappeared with a crumpled denim jacket and took a seat opposite us but oriented herself toward Brit. She didn’t look at me. She

wore a black tea shirt and black pants and, looking past the edge of the table, I could see a pair of pink sneakers. Her face was round and quite pale, her hair its natural jet black. I thought of the black jam inside a sesame *bau tz* – her hair just as black and shiny, her face as pale looking as the dough.

"So how are you, how you been?" Brit fluted. The girl ducked her head a bit. Just then a waitress came around the corner, poised, expectant, smiling. Brit ordered in Mandarin. She was having another Manhattan. And a beer for me. She looked at Miss Ho who shook her head. Then the waitress left.

"Are you still seeing your friend? His girlfriend, you know," Brit said and tilted her thumb toward me. Miss Ho ignored this and still didn't look at me. "Who's my friend?" the girl said, she was smiling broadly.

"Or that teacher? His enemy." Just then the waitress came back and set down our drinks.

"Linn," Brit clarified. "You know he's the best teacher in the whole place. You know," the girl said. She sat with her arms crossed in front of her and she was suppressing laughter. "Why are you always so down on him?" Brit took a sip of her drink and then drew on her cigarette, blowing smoke up toward the amber colored light that was like a half-opened flower." She made her lower lip into a kind of ledge.

"Well, you better watch out, right?"

"There's nothing like that. Don't be silly," the girl said.

"Not what I heard."

"All lies."

"Fine. But it's not just that."

"We have to have our own culture," the girl said, as though knowing in advance where it all was going. I realized they were picking up where they'd left off, wherever and whenever that was.

"Fine. Good. I am an actress." Brit said.

"When are we going to see you on stage again?"

“Never mind.” Brit fanned it away with prawn-like fingertips.

“I’m serious.” The girl smiled, teasing.

“No. I know culture, all about – yes. But you cannot eat culture, wear culture when it’s raining out, live in culture when it’s cold dark outside. Typhoon coming, you going to hide inside culture? And you have people there, they are strange, have strange ideas, foreigners…”

“No, it is us. Besides, foreign ideas are good. We need all that. We are modern. We are international – multi-cultural.”

“Yeah yeah.” Brit raised herself in her seat and marched with her shoulder. ‘Oh we are independent now.’ Then she slumped back to herself and regarded her drink. “No sense to make trouble, rock the boat. Tip it over. They come here, kill us all. Yeah, pile of dead bodies – you can come and put a sign: Here is Democracy.”

“Very funny. That’s not what it is. We have to change.”

“To what?”

Miss Ho rose onto the edge of her seat, and her gentle tirade was clearly the latest installment in an ongoing yet somewhat playful dispute: “You think it is just – ” she wavered her hand in the air, “just pie in the sky…no. I know what it was – my own family – I’ve seen it, I know. I want Taiwan to be democratic, and rule of law, not…things that I have seen. I will do anything for that.”

In my memory, Miss Ho’s face fades beneath a silver scrim of water beads. The wipers were off. The car was dark. “So you’re going home now?” Brit said.

“Yes,” I said.

“All right.… Look –” She turned toward me, her face was even more beautiful in the car’s sealed darkness. “I know I am difficult; I know, I am… crazy a little sometimes, drink too much, talk too loud, smoke too much…” she confided. And then she grabbed my hand and held it. Headlights streaked past – a luminous crackle spread across rainy windows. “I know what you need,” she said. She placed my hand on her breast. “She doesn’t.”

Her face was close to mine, her lips inches away. The scent of alcohol and perfume, her eyes so intense, a soft glitter. She undid her blouse and drew the one cup aside and slid my hand within. I felt her breast, and the soft bud of her nipple. I thought of a bee lost in the deep folds of a chrysanthemum. “I know, she doesn’t. She only knows what *she* needs.” I felt the warmth of her skin, so soft and smooth. I could feel her softly vibrating solid life. How wonderful. The tips of our noses touched; it was as if we were meditating in tandem, somehow.

“I have to go,” I said.

“Yes, I know,” she said and pulled away and I withdrew my hand. She sat somewhat hunched before the wheel.

“I’ll talk to you later,” I said.

“Yes, of course.” She reached out suddenly with both hands and our two arms intertwined and my lip slid along her cheek and then forehead. Her arms were so tense. Then she withdrew again. “Ok,” she said. I opened the door to leave, but she grabbed my hand. “I have to warn you. You don’t know what she is.”

“We’ll talk later,” I said and ran my hands over her arms, trying to soothe her.

“Yes, of course,” she said and turned back toward the wheel and started the car. I closed the door and stepped out onto the street, waved good-bye, and she drove off, and I walked back to my place.

The wooden kitchen table felt solid and reassuring. I was eating some cold *mi fen* out of a plastic shell. The door rang and I answered. In a moment Mei-Hwa appeared in the doorway. In the rectangular slice of light she stood there, in a tan leather coat I’d never seen before, open, and past which I noticed a rather frilly blouse of a sort I’d never seen her wear. All this past in an instant, the instant in which she stepped through the door and clasped both my arms and set her forehead against my chest pushing

and then burrowing into me. I drew her forward and held her and after a moment she turned her face up to me, with a peculiar smile.

“I want to have your baby,” she said. “Will you give me a baby?”

In a dark room, and yet not entirely dark, our two shadows shone on the wall and then it was just her shadow alone, and then we were drawn together more completely and there was no talking at all anymore. And then minutes later she cried out, again, and again. Then I was pressed against her chest, and I could feel her breathing and then my lips were against her face and she seemed to be far away somewhere, as though she had been drawn beneath a wave and, by magic, the mattress and unfolded sheets had brought her up from the depths where she had gone. Then it was our lips together and her whisper*, confiding confiding confiding*. Later the apartment was partly lit, and light glared from the edge of the door of the bathroom where she’d gone. And a moment later she came back in, wearing her white bathrobe and stood in the doorway.

“I have to go now,” she said. It was not yet midnight.

“Why? Where?” She was a wraith near the high closet, its door floating open. She dropped her bathrobe and it fell white and soft to the floor like snow dropping silently from a roof edge. Her body was luminous and pale in the room, as she slid her arms through her bra and fastened it. My passion for her was overwhelming, just then. Just then I would have done anything….

“Where are you going?”

“It’s for work. I have to interview someone.” She sat at the bed’s edge. She slid one hand along the bed sheet as though she thought that would placate me. She looked at me. “She is very – elusive,” she said as she scooped sideways with her chin. “And she maybe knows some…important things.” I drew her partway to me but she resisted and drew back. “I have to go. Really.”

“Ok,” I said. I watched her as she finished getting dressed.

“I’ll call you later,” she said as she stood in the doorway, the semi lit apartment behind her. “All right,” I said and a few moments later the outside door clicked shut.

CHAPTER 23

I got back to my place later that day. Although spring would be coming soon, the weather still kept fits and starts of cold. The clouds flowed

white gray over the city, stark against the night sky. I walked past the stalls of the Shuanglien market. Most were closed by then, though there were a few still open here and there. It was like a circus being taken down a piece at a time. A huge roach ran madly out from one vegetable stall, and a thin wiry guy in jeans and tea shirt danced about in the concourse, trying to stamp on it, a fan of light from the stall made a kind of theatre stage around him. In the nearby temple, a few old men were sitting drinking tea, talking. I got to my place and put my key into the silver door, cold and damp, and went into the entryway lit by a light the color of cheese rind, the tile stairs crème colored, then the cage-like gate at the top and then the wooden door. The place was empty of course.

Later that evening she called. I was surprised but happy to hear from her, despite everything. “What are you doing?” she said. Her voice was bright, chirpy, the way it so often was, a kind of tease hidden in it, as so often.

“Just sitting here,” I said. I had been reading.

“Doing what? Nothing?”

“Thinking, reading…”

“Ok…always so serious.”

“Can’t help it.”

“Well is it ok I come to see you?”

“Yes sure.”

“Great.”

I paced a little. If I’d been a smoker I would have been chain smoking. There were many feelings inside me, and I couldn’t sort them out. This had been the case from my very first days on the island – ‘the island’ as it was so often called by the expatriates – but it seemed that it all became more pointed and confusing since the start of our relationship.

She was seated on the sofa, the bare windows behind her and the night behind them. I was standing in the bedroom doorway. I recalled how it was when she arrived, stepping into the room with a strange caution, as

though she were afraid of knocking something over, some rare antique perhaps. Now she sat on the couch, perched there, almost ready for flight. I crossed to the other side of the room and took a chair. “What’s wrong?” she said.

“Nothing.”

She looked at me quizzically and inclined her head a bit, the way she often did, questioning, curious, amused. She had on a black dress and red open-toed shoes. A small white handbag was set beside her. She had twisted herself around in such a way that the hourglass shape of her figure showed the more. There were dimmed sounds from the courtyards and walkways below and, from farther off, traffic noise. Taipei moving, smoldering, searching, at all hours. The constant fire.

“Where were you all this time?” I said. “Where have you been going?”

She glanced down. Hesitating for a moment. Then she looked back up, a shiver of tension in her shoulders. “I had a lot of things to do. Work. John’s…things.” She dipped her gaze on the word then seemed about to say something. But didn’t. Was there a hint of anger? But it was perhaps rather frustration.

“I think you just want to be with me,” I said, “because you think it might be an advantage for you at some point – in your work, your…career… all that. You don’t really want to be with me just for myself.” I had been waiting for a while to say this. Now on impulse I said it all straight out.

“That’s crazy,” she said and tossed her head as though to fling my statement away.

“No, it’s true,” I said.

“That’s so wrong!” She turned away and placed a hand on her purse. But then straightened up as though letting herself be a target.

“Maybe it has to do with being able to live in the United States at some point,” I said. “You want to be able to go there.”

“I live here,” she said, taking in a breath and seemed about to get up. “I’m Taiwanese. I will always be. Understand?” she said as she rose and went toward the door.

“And you’re not telling me enough about the people you’re with. All these ‘friends.’ Who are they?

“Friends are friends. How is that strange?” she said as though amazed, surprised at this sudden turn. She stood against the door about to leave.

“And you’re not telling me where you go or who you’re seeing.”

“I don’t have to tell you everything I do.” She introjected the note of a ‘couple’ having a ‘fight’. But it dispersed quickly, a dying note, as she adjusted her posture to face me, no longer pressing to leave. “You know what I’m saying,” I said dropping the pebbles into the well and – there was a silence. “And I still think that you have…other reasons for being with me.”

“Well,” she said with a much quieter voice, “there are many reasons. Of course. There always are in any relationship.” ‘Isn’t this always the case?’ her expression added wordlessly. And she lingered a moment in shadows of her own creation.

“You want to use me somehow.”

“There are always many facets to any relationship. It’s always complicated. Isn’t it?” she added briskly, her hair shivering a bit. Then another side tilt of her head as though to say ‘come on, you know….”

“So then what is it?” I said.

“I don’t know what you mean. There’s only you I want. Of course.” She came closer and extended both her arms, her hands palm up.

“That’s not what you just said.”

“I didn’t mean it that –” she broke off. “You think I have some kind of mercenary attitude.”

“Yes.”

“No no no!” she shook her head. And then she clung to me, resting her forehead against my shoulder. “Come on,” she implored. “Come on.” But my mood didn’t change. I myself didn’t know why. Too many things twisted around inside of me. “I just want to be by myself,” I said. She stiffened and stepped away.

“Fine,” she said in a quiet definitive way. Then she squeezed both my hands, gave me a small smile, and left.

I stretched out on the sofa that ran along one concrete wall. The curtains were drawn but the sun outside shone around the edges. Thin spars of shadow tilted down the opposite wall. They were high concrete walls that met an off-white ceiling and, downward, a tiled floor. The pattern of the tiles marched forward and backward in crosses, squares, rectangles, as one wished.

It was a nice office, solid, very spacious, well-lit, and with a wide view of the campus and the city beyond. I decided that the move into Taipei had been a mistake. I would move back here to the provincial town where the university was located. The commuting back and forth was too much trouble and too tiring, and I needed to spend more time here being available to students. And spending so much time with Mei-Hwa was making me feel that I was, in a sense, losing control of my own life by being drawn too much into hers. And hers was a very complicated one, it was a fabric folded and refolded in many intricate ways, and I knew that I had not yet understood all of the turnings and passages that were there.

Then Gretchen was in the room. Leaning one hip against the air, that arm extended down, the hand tentatively reaching. “May I sit down?” she said. “Of course,” I said, and she adjusted her wiry figure into the armchair near the desk. “How have you been doing? She wrapped one forearm over the other and stretched toward me a bit. “I’m fine.” For a moment the impulse went through me to convey all the problems I had been having, but then just as quickly I suppressed it. I wasn’t even entirely sure at the time

why. “Really?” she said, leaning toward me a bit more, searching my face. I noticed the flecks of gray in her irises. Her eyes seemed at that moment animated, lyrical. “But how is the situation with your money? I don’t want to pry, but we have to be practical. They’re making things difficult?”

“Yes, a little.”

She raised herself and twisted partway around, leading with her nose as though she were searching the walls for an answer. Then she quickly turned back “Well who is helping with that. Anyone?”

“Kate,” I said.

“Oh no.” A vibratory grimace showed displeasure. She was sending the order back to the kitchen. “You can’t…I won’t say trust – I’m sure that aspect…but you know. People like that…she has all kinds of things going on. And one of them is you know who.”

“Who?”

“Linn,” she said. “I’m not sure how much time or… attention she would have….”

“Can he help in some way? Not directly…but…?”

“No no no,” she said with a grim smile, looking down at her hands that were braided together in her lap. She was silent for a while. “He’s a weak timorous person,” she said finally. “They think of him as some sort of leader, but I don’t know…he seems to be a rather weak timorous person. Has he ever spoken to you?”

“No.”

“There, you see. And he doesn’t want to stand up to certain things that he’s done. We won’t get into it. I don’t engage in gossip. But they’re all theatre people, you know, the lot of them. Your friend Kate. Linn, I think he plays some kind of role – everything’s all theater to them – striking poses – image, nothing serious, no substance.”

“You sound like Lu.”

"Yes, well we're both pragmatists. I do field research in linguistics, he's into real estate…" and she laughed at this and slapped a bony hand – strikingly long – onto the chair's vinyl arm pad.

"But I just feel I have to warn you about your friend."

"Which?"

"Kate. You think she is…. But look at how she was at the fitness review. Was she a supporter? No. And she comes in here, on the sly meeting with Linn. What are they doing? and then she comes to you…"

I decided not to react to this and said nothing.

"I'm not suggesting the obvious. They were teacher and student. But these theatre types are always. Well…I don't know, but I think you get the idea."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I know."

"But how *much* do you know?"

"I'm not sure," I said. And there was a moment of unforced candor between us. "Yes, right," she said as her gaze broke away for a moment, and it was as if we were both equal victims of something larger and baffling.

"Some kind of cabal had formed against you here before you even arrived. I told you this before."

"You were quite vague."

"Yes, well it was necessary to be at the time."

"Why?"

"It simply was. Your mentor here is Lu. He can't be trusted. You need an American. But an experienced one, someone who knows the system here. You shouldn't spend so much time with Lu."

"He's been quite helpful."

"It might seem like that, but who else is he talking to? And what are his interests? I'll tell you quite plainly. That's the way it is for us. I would say the three of us, but about her… I don't know…. He has many connections external to the university, but which the university depends on. We can't get into it…"

“Yes well, all right,” I said and we changed the subject to something innocuous. She seemed calmer than she had been. A certain electricity had been dampened somehow. She seemed to be thinking of any of several things, and I wondered what they could be.

CHAPTER 24

I was just coming out of the kitchen with some tea when there was someone at the door. I set the cup down on the wooden table and buzzed the lock. A minute later she stood in the door way. She looked somewhat haggard. “May I come in?” she said with an inquiring up turn of her face. “Sure,” I said, and stepped aside to let her in. She took off her coat and took a seat on the couch. She wore a loose white blouse, tight jeans, and black shoes. Her jacket was a quilted gold. Her hair had been drawn back in a loose gather behind her head and now she let it go free, an onyx curtain let down. It was a gesture at once provocative and protective, and it was hard to assess the relative proportions.

“I just want to – ” She had her fingertips at her temples then swept both hands down in an arc. “— make clear. I didn’t mean at all what you seemed to think.”

“No?”

“No. I never meant that there was anything other than my feelings for you that are why I want to be with you. Of course! What else would it be? I was simply saying that I have naturally different goals, I guess, and when I’m thinking of the future I think of them, and I think of you at the same time. You’re always there in my thoughts about the future. Always. How can it be any way else?” I sat there listening. And after a bit she paused and I took the opportunity to get up and make some more tea. I thought a bit of that might be in order.

“I’m going to make some more tea ok?” I said as I rose to go into the kitchen.

“Sure,” she said, vaguely, distracted, her gaze focused on the floor before her. I left and occupied myself in the kitchen getting the water ready – it was already pretty hot. Then I took the tea pot that Mei-Hwa had bought for me and I remembered when I first had taken it out of its box at a time that seemed ages ago though it had been only some months. It was a pale blue pot with a design of darker blue leaves around the rim, very delicately

and precisely made. A work of artistry and devotion. I brought it in and poured some tea into a cup for her. It was a golden pool in the frail but sharp white cup.

We sat there drinking tea. She seemed distracted. I thought of other people who had sat in the same living room – Jim and Evan, and Pei-Wen of course. And then of the people at the fancy town house – the translator, the madam, the three girls in their long gowns, even my students, the ones who had visited me with their tense warnings – it was as if they all circled at the periphery of the room like a ghostly chorus. And then I said “I’m decided to move back to be nearer the school.”

She took a breath in, raising her shoulders a bit, as though bracing. “Why?” she said very softly. Almost a whisper. Then she looked at me, a brief glint in her eye. “I have to,” I said. “It’s too time consuming, commuting back and forth. It’s so inconvenient.”

“It’s all about convenience,” she said and she treated an imaginary opponent with disdainful agreement. “That’s not what I meant,” I said. “I think you know.”

“How would I know?”

“I think you know.”

“Well how?” And she lunged forward and grabbed the handle of the teapot, but I blocked her hands and for a moment we had a mad contest as we each struggled over the thin bamboo- covered handle. Tea splashed on the table. Our hands touched as we did and then I broke her grip and she stood and swept her cup from the table and smashed it against the floor, as though she were whipping a towel dry – white crystalline fragments, very sharp looking, thrown in an explosive splash on the wooden floor. “I’m done with you!” she shouted and seemed about to cry. “I’m done. It’s over with you!”

“Can you calm down?”

“No, I won’t calm down! Why does it have to be me who calms down?” She shook herself as though casting off rainwater. “You’re always so

superior. And everything's about you. And now your convenience – commute time – is more important than our relationship." She did not look directly at me during any of this. Then she composed herself, standing quite straight, and stepped over to the couch. "I'm sorry, I can't do this anymore." Then she gathered up her coat and, as she had done several times before, let herself out, slamming the door loudly behind her.

I went back and drank the rest of tea, which was still warm. Then I went to the window and for a few minutes watched the people coming and going in the concourse below and the traditional market across the way. Then I went out and got a bottle of wine. I still had some of my prescription left and I washed a couple pills down with several glasses of white wine, a bad habit I had broken for a while but which had crept back. Then after a while I went to sleep.

There were several days of silence, but then I got an email from her:

Our relationship is very important for me, but it's as if I can't find of *form* for it.

We're not getting any younger

John's death really made me think what life is for. I don't know what to do.

It was now the season of heat and light. But it was not that hot yet, and I had the windows open. A soft breeze flowed in, the curtain rising a little now and then. The light made vague ribbon-like patterns on the floor. It was Saturday in the late morning. I was sitting in the living room drinking coffee, thinking. Outside hundreds of people came and went in the concourses below and the market was crowded and noisy. There must have been a thousand people. The day was bright with breeze and huge clouds pushed along in the intense blue sky.

The phone rang. I was surprised. But I felt I knew who it had to be. And I was relieved as well. Isolation, loneliness, and a background hum of anxiety had been encircling me, and, as I said, I had fallen back into my drinking and pills.

“Hello,” I said. There was a long silence. “Hello,” I said again.

“Hello.” Her voice was low and hoarse. Then she cleared her throat and spoke up, “Hi,” and then a very soft “Hello.” And then, “Are you free?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Can we talk?”

“Yes, sure.”

“I’m sorry for…”

“That’s all right.”

“For losing my temper.”

“That’s ok. How are you, are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“Where are you?”

“In my room at my house. You know…”

“Yes, all right…”

“I just want you to know…I’m very sorry. I just…I felt you weren’t really hearing me, when I was saying how important you are to me. And our relationship. I just felt devalued in a way.”

“Devalued?”

“Yes. My statements. My saying what I felt. Like you weren’t listening.”

“I’m always listening when you say things.”

“Sometimes I think your mind is far away.”

“Well sometimes it is.”

“Well, that’s what I mean.”

“You know how I am,” I said. But she ignored this and went on:

“And you don’t seem to realize everything I have to go through to do my work, which is so demanding.”

“I know it is.”

“But you don’t, and on top of that…I don’t want to say…”

“What?”

“Never mind. But I have to come face to face with all the problems of this society…we still have so much poverty, and there is interference.”

“From where?”

“Many places. I don’t want to say anymore right now. And as a foreigner, especially from the US …”

“Well?”

“I mean I know you’re sort of in flight from it.”

“That’s what one of my students said. I told you.”

“Yes, it’s true. But still, you’re still from there.”

“So I can’t understand you because of that.”

“I didn’t mean that.”

“You just said it. Just like when you admitted –”

“I don’t want to go there.”

“Well you did. You basically said you’re with me only because it helps your career. Somehow.”

“I didn’t say only. I said it does or might in a certain way.”

“You want to go there. To the US.”

“No, I don’t.”

“You say things and then unsay them. This is what you do.”

“No, I’m sorry. We’re not getting anywhere.”

“No.”

“I’m sorry, I have to go.”

It was a coffee place near the national theatre. It was a shop that had been there for quite a while, with wooden tables, dark tiles on the floor, bamboo blinds across the one picture window, now pulled up to let patrons follow the pedestrian traffic along the street outside – people walking, driving, bicycling – and flowers along the wide ledge and some pretty light

green ferns in the corner. People sat at odd angles here and there at tables that been set like that. I ordered a cup of coffee – black – and felt how satisfying it was as a change of pace from all the teas – so many – as light and fragrant and subtle as they were. She was late as usual. And just as I was thinking this, she pushed her way through the front door, a brief aura of glare behind her. It was a bright hot day outside. She wore a crimson crushed velvet dress, a short white jacket over it, rather maritime looking, I thought, and red high-heeled shoes. She raised her chin when she saw me, and I thought I detected a slight intake of breath. Whether that was the case on her end or not, it was on mine – she looked rather dazzling, an almost absurdly glamorous apparition taking form out of subtropical sunlight. Before she sat down she went to the counter and ordered. Then she took a seat opposite me, screwing her rear end down into the chair, adjusting her hair with a sweep of her fingers. She wore nail polish, unusual for her, a deep crimson. She gave the table a little pat with the fingers of both hands as though to say ‘well’ and looked at me with a questioning gaze. The server came with her tea, and she took this opportunity to look down. “Well,” she said, “I’m sorry we’re having all these…problems.”

“I’m sorry too,” I said.

“Do you think we should go to the couples’ therapist? I mentioned this before,” she said as she raised the teacup to her lips and looked off to the side, then back, with a brief shake of her long hair, which she swept back again and past one shoulder.

“Well, maybe,” I said. “Maybe after a while.”

“I think it should be sooner,” she said, drawing her jacket up and past her collar bone, curving that shoulder in as though she were cold. Then she looked straight at me. “I think it should be sooner.”

“Well, all right.”

“It makes me feel like you’re more committed to our relationship.”

“I am committed.”

“Well, as I said. I just feel like you’re distant at times. It makes me feel like you’re seeing someone else.”

“I am not seeing anyone else. You know perfectly well.”

“How do I know?”

“Why are you saying this? We’re together all the time. You know.”

“Except when you’re back there at the college.”

“Except when you run off, to where who knows, with whom who knows.”

“And you say you want to move back there. How does that make me feel? She looked at me and inclined her head like a plane banking. Her eyes were dancing with an annoyed impersonation of amusement. I said nothing, and we sat there for a minute in silence.

“I don’t *want* to move back, I *have* to.”

“No you don’t.”

“Yes. I do. It’s been bad for my teaching and writing too, all the commuting back and forth. And it doesn’t look good.”

“Well, fine. But it just shows…”

“Shows what?”

“Never mind. You don’t understand how hurtful it is. You’re just like all the other foreigners who come here, fool around, lots of pretty girls. I thought you were different,” she said as she looked down at the table shaking her head in a sorrowful way. For a moment I wondered if she was serious. “You’re just like all the other Americans. Just like your government is not really serious. Promise this or that.…”

“You’re talking crazy.”

“And we cannot rely on anything. And no, I’m not.”

She drew a half-cupped hand down the center of her dress between her breasts. It was so fair against the crimson cloth. I thought of a lily or a pale seashell. There was something so endearing about her, something deep inside. I couldn’t help but think of a wounded child, which she perhaps had been.

“I have to go,” she said and seemed to inhale, bringing her shoulders back, and then she pulled her jacket around her. “So we’re just friends now. And I’ve changed my mind about…you know what it is.”

CHAPTER 25

My office door was closed, but through it I could hear the sounds of the department during the day. It was about 2 o'clock. People walking by, profs, students, talking, laughter occasionally. I was at my computer writing lecture notes for my class later that afternoon. I needed to wall myself off from the rest of the place for reasons that seemed to become more pressing as time went on. I never had felt more isolated. I rose and went to the blinds to stretch myself a bit and look out the window. I always enjoyed looking out across the rooftops of the college, ranged like terraces, and the elevated walkways that linked the buildings with each other. And on the walkways were huge urns such as you see in Buddhist temples, in which incense sticks are placed during prayer. In the fair weather they were full of bright flowers that rippled and flashed in the breeze and sun. Then I turned back to my work, but almost as soon as I had seated myself there was a knock at the door. "Come in," I said, loudly. There was a considerable distance between my desk and the door. The door opened and a mop of onyx hair appeared in the wedge between door and wall. Then a face, with an expression tinged with a certain hesitancy. It was Pei-Wen.

"May I come in?"

"Sure," I said. I saw that she had changed her hair style. She seemed to do this at times, maybe on the influence of Mei-Hwa. She wore jeans, white sneakers, and a light brown jacket over a black tea shirt. I wasn't used to seeing her in such casual dress. After she sat down she put her hands cupped in her lap for a moment and then looked up. "Well," she said. "I hope I'm not keeping you from your work. But I just had to talk to you in person. Mei-Hwa told me these were your office hours."

"Yes, they are. No, that's fine. As you see, no one's here," I said and gestured to the four walls. She smiled at my little attempt at humor. "Yes,

well," she said. I noticed her graceful neck. It was as if I had for a while been shown different aspects of her personality, and even of her physical nature, as though in a sequence of stills. "So," she said. "I wanted to tell you, Mei-Hwa, you know…"

"Yes, ok…"

"Yes," she said with a little shake of her cupped hands. It was as though she were shaking dice. "She is really really –" and she shook her dice with each word "Upset…which I'm not in any way blaming you for…"

"Ok, well, I just have to change the logistics. I can't be commuting so much. It's hurting my work."

"I know. It's completely reasonable."

"I'm leaving Taipei, not her."

"Her sense of being wanted, of being …attractive even. Is like something trembling on a branch."

"Yes, I know. I don't want to hurt her feelings. I just –"

"I know, I know. And then after John's death –"

"Well, that's another thing. How do you think all that made me feel?" She looked down at the floor but said nothing. Then she looked up and glanced briefly at me. "I know," she said. She looked off toward the windows. "Why are you here?" I said. "Do you have to see someone else?"

"No," she said. But I was not convinced. "No, I just came to see you. You have to realize how much she cares about you."

"She's embarrassed by me."

"No, no –"

I wondered if Pei-Wen knew that Mei-Hwa had "changed her mind," as she had put it. "Yes. She's embarrassed to be seen with me. I wonder why." She stiffened a bit. "No, she's not. Another thing is Brit. You spend a lot of time with her." She looked at me, her eyes widened just enough to avoid a suggestion of blame.

"She helps me with different things." She tilted her head and screwed a smile toward me as though gently to pry something loose. "Yes well…it

hurts her feelings. She doesn't like to show things like that. You know, show weakness."

I didn't believe that she had come here to see only me. She knew that I didn't. This resonated between us silently. "But what is the main reason that you've come?" I said.

"To tell you these things." But after saying this she seemed to weaken inside in some way. I never knew how much I could trust her.

"Well, we don't know where she is."

"That's another thing, she's always running off." I regretted this immediately. And she did indeed seem to wince. "Well," she patted the air down before her with both hands, the fingers splayed, "this time we really don't." I noticed she said 'this time.' Did this mean they knew at other times? And whom did these times involve? I felt that my responses were being carefully observed. "Can you come and meet with us soon?" she asked.

"Meet with whom?"

"You know, me, Jim, Evan…" Her eyes searched her mind for a moment, "maybe someone else, I'm not sure."

"When would this be?"

"Whenever is convenient, but before too long." I wasn't sure by her manner whether she meant convenient for me or for someone else. Then she pressed both hands on my wrist. "I have to go now. I'll be in touch, ok? but I don't want you to worry."

"I am worried," I said, and it was really true. It was a current that had been submerged for some moments but which now had forced its way to the surface of my mind. Then she got up, drew her jacket around herself and left rather quickly, her shoes clicking on the tile floor. And the door clicked shut.

I was sitting in a small café near my apartment. It was one of the small businesses in the large cluster of buildings that ran like a skein of

giant cream-colored blocks opposite the long open-air market. It was mainly a breakfast place, but they stayed open into the early afternoon for coffee, tea, and snacks. The tall windows looked out onto the concourse that led out toward the Chong Ching North Road and the subway station. I had been having more of my episodes. The images – the episodes – had been dispelled by giving so much of my attention to her, but now, in this strange period of alienation, they all came rushing back. At an early age, ghosts of the murdered, the victims, images of charred human bodies – their specters – had taken hold of me. Trauma echoes outward through a place and time. But it does not stop at this one or at that one – it goes on and on from one to another, like concentric ripples in water, touching even those not directly involved, from generation to generation. It does not stop. And my pills and my drinking had come back again with it all, and my sleeplessness as well. I was not hung over but tired, and with that there was a feeling of foreboding I couldn't understand. The waitress was a small friendly girl with short hair who brought me my sandwich and cup of coffee. Then my phone rang. I was almost hesitant to answer and eager to as well, the two impulses fighting briefly with each other. It was her, of course. "Hello," I said. There was a pause, as though she was herself hesitant. "Hi," she answered.

"Do you have time?" she said.

"Yes ok," I said, asking rather than telling.

"Uh I…I'm at a police station."

"Why? What for?"

"I had a car accident." I was blank for a second. There was a middle-aged woman in a white dress that reached to the middle of her calf sitting at a table near the window. The little waitress went to her, dipping her head down. I noticed streaks in the front door's window. I ran my hand along the edge of the table.

"Are you all right?"

"I was hurt a little bit. But…I'm ok. The other people are here." She was whispering.

“What people?” I kept my voice low, as though falling in line.

“The people in the car that hit me. Can you come?”

“Yes,” I said. “Sure.”

“Ok, thank you,” she said. There was a silence. And then she told me the address. At first I wondered if it was real, or instead some kind of strange prank. But of course I dismissed this. I got up and paid and left. I turned right and walked out to the Chong Ching Road since it was always very busy, and I knew there would be cabs floating around. The concourse was crowded with people and the road with cars, though it was not the rush hour. Clutches of a dozen or two dozen people were scattered through the market. Sun shone brightly on the stalls’ signs and metal fittings of tarpaulins and the pale wooden troughs and baskets that were set out. It was a bright ordinary day. I raised a hand and a yellow cab nosed in toward the curb. I got in the back seat. There was the usual heavy scent of air freshener, a Guan Lin Buddha, graceful and pale, on the dashboard. The driver was an older man with a helmet of salt and pepper hair, a sepia complexion with deep lines and creases. He nodded and smiled, his teeth stained to a pale pomegranate by betel nut. I gave him the address. “It’s police station, right?” he said. I said yes.

“I know how to get there quick,” he said and nodded as though to emphasize, friendly and serious. “Ok, thank you.” “Sure,” he said, and we set off threading our way through the loud, bright, crowding traffic. I thought once again, as I so often had in the past, that Taipei must have the most good-natured cab drivers in the world. She told me that she would wait for me outside the station. I called her up and she confirmed that she would. “Are you all right? Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m all right. Just a little hurt.”

“Well maybe just stay inside.”

“No that’s ok.”

We passed through the car-crowded mazes of the city. Sometimes faster, sometimes slower. The driver did seem to know what he was doing.

We ended up in an area I wasn't familiar with – industrial buildings with no houses. Then we turned into a narrow street, gray and chalky looking. And far at the end there was the police station, a sandy-colored building with a sign and secure metal doors. There was Mei-Hwa standing in the road – there were no sidewalks – walking toward us, smiling. I told the cab to stop near her. He nodded. Then she was leaning in toward me at the opposite window. She was dressed in jeans and a loose-fitting linen blouse. Her hair was quite disheveled. I paid the driver and thanked him. He nodded and smiled, his reddish teeth flashing. Then I got out. It was an ordinary day, but she stood in front of me, her hands at her sides, looking at me with questions and nervous anticipation in her face.

I took her hand and she led me toward the police station. She wrapped both arms around mine as we entered through the heavy metal-framed doors. To the left there was a chest-high counter, topped with a sheet of heavy glass with a faintly blue-green tint. There was an older woman in a gray suit behind it who tilted toward us, as though to lend an ear. She and Mei-Hwa spoke briefly and the woman gestured with one hand. Then a younger woman in uniform came out from a raft of grey metal desks set behind another counter with heavy glass in front of it. The lights overhead were sparkly bright and reminded me of seltzer. She greeted us politely and indicated a rather steep stairwell that led up to a second floor. I went ahead, the tiled stairs had black rubber bumpers. Mei-Hwa grasped my hand tightly, and the lady officer came up behind us, shepherding.

When we got to the second floor there were more desks and counters, but they were waist height and without protective glass. There were three in a horseshoe, but to the right as we came in, and somewhat to the rear, was a set of metal folding chairs along a white-painted wall. There were two people sitting there, a couple in their thirties, apparently waiting for our arrival. They were the occupants of the car that had caused the accident. When she noticed them, Mei-Hwa immediately went over and hugged both, first the woman, a short rather dowdy-looking girl with hair to her

shoulders, henna streaks in it, a glamorous touch that did nothing for her and gray stretch pants and sneakers; and then she hugged the man, the actual driver. She had to reach up for this since he was tall, somewhat paunchy in a white tea shirt, jeans, and black flip flops. Then there was a period of shaking hands with both alternately. During all this she asked them about any injuries, and if they were all right. She spoke Taiwanese to them rather than Mandarin, so I caught only bits and pieces. They were the ones who banged into her, but her attention was focused only on their welfare. Then the three of them were approached by the lady cop who, smiling broadly, guided them over to the central counter. During all this, police officers in dark blue uniforms with badges and sidearms came and went, ignoring the whole scene. A tall rather stern officer inquired whether she would press charges. She kept saying no, but he seemed somewhat reluctant to accept this. The couple looked on, standing close to each other, rather apprehensive. But Mei-Hwa kept assuring him that this was really her decision. Then he seemed to accept this and went back to visit a couple of file cabinets and a nearby desk, returning with various forms. Meanwhile the lady cop left, saying a quick goodbye with a polite minimal bow. After forms were signed, another woman came from behind the right counter and led us back downstairs, accompanying us to the entry. We all emerged onto the concrete platform and then down the stairs. When we were out on the road, standing there, Mei-Hwa continued to talk with the couple, assuring them that she was all right and that she didn't blame them at all. I was impressed, though not surprised, at her genuine concern for others rather than herself. Then they got into their dilapidated-looking car and left. Mei-Hwa had to pick up her own car from a fenced-in area around the side. There was a small gash in the door on the passenger's side, but it was otherwise undamaged. When we got in, I asked her if she was really all right.

"You said you were hurt a little." My fingertips stroked her bare forearms. I felt once again the almost startling softness of her skin. Then my

fingers ran to the lapels of her loose-fitting blouse, and then to the small joints of her collar bones. There was a kind of question in her eyes and just the very beginnings of smile. “My neck is kind of sore.” she said. She straightened a little and said, “but it’s ok.” And she shook her head slightly. “It’s nothing.”

“No, no. If it’s your neck it should be checked.”

“Really, I don’t –” and she set her hand near my bicep and smiled.

“No, we better go get it checked.”

“Really –”

“No, no –”

“All right,” she consented.

“Where should we go?”

She hesitated and then said the name of a hospital, a small one not far away.

“Ok. Can you drive all right?”

“Yes. Sure.”

We made our way across town and parked in the hospital parking lot. There were open spaces near the emergency entrance, so we didn’t have far to walk. We went through the automatic doors. The intense sun was yanked away in favor of medical lighting and air conditioning. Mei-Hwa held my hand, walking with the small mincing steps she sometimes had, her elbows close to her sides, the opposite forearm set across her middle. We approached the intake desk. She was told to sit. After she had explained, a nurse came up quickly to take vital signs. Then right behind her was a young guy pushing a gurney. He and the nurse eased Mei-Hwa onto it, making sure that her head was well supported and then wheeled her away toward an examining room. Before they got very far, she extended an arm toward me like someone doing a backstroke and asked if I could come. The attendant said nothing, but the nurse said ok, so I went along with them.

The doctor came in right away, a tall distinguished looking guy with a broad oval face, a friendly manner, and perfect English. He carefully

examined Mei-Hwa's neck – she held very still, a set look on her face as though she were peering at something in the corner. But at the same time, I noticed the very smallest possible smile. She was being brave. His assessment was positive, he said smiling at both of us, but he still required a set of x-rays anyway. So then
Mei-Hwa was wheeled away and I was asked to wait in the entry area.

There were seats in a waiting room opposite the intake. I took up one. People came and went. There was a middle-aged man, short and stocky, a workman of some kind or maybe a farmer, who, when given a brief message by a nurse who had followed him, broke down crying. He bent over, his face contorted in anguish, then straightened after a moment and walked out through the automatic doors, past which the bright day blazed. There were a couple of older women, short and slim with very dark complexions, black hair tied up in knots behind their head. I thought of the tea pickers, women who work on the numerous tea plantation. They spend so much of their life under brutal sun, wrapped in protective veils draped from broad bamboo hats, picking the tea leaves carefully. There were a couple of nuns dressed in white, which surprised me, since it was not a catholic hospital, but there they were. After a while a nurse came out to get me. I was briefly alarmed but she had a reassuring manner. I followed her back to a special room where Mei-Hwa was sitting up on an examination table. The doctor was there and he was displaying the x-rays on a screen. There were three black rectangular pictures, the x-ray images of Mei-Hwa's neck. The vertebrae were like a faintly luminous bracelet of some kind. It looked unbearably fragile. She glanced at me to see my reaction. The doctor said that everything looked all right. He just advised her to take aspirin if there was any residual soreness, but she was able to go.

When we were seated in the car I had to inspect her actual neck, which was very slim, and graceful, and she held her chin out a bit, as I ran my fingertips up and down, pushing strands of her black hair, as black as licorice, aside as I did. The skin on her neck was very soft and fair. And just

then there was a welling up of feelings inside me and I gathered her to me and kissed her neck and kissed her face over and over. My desire could hardly be contained, but it was mingled with an intense protectiveness. I wanted to push the whole world away from her, I wanted to hold her and protect her forever. And then we kissed so deeply and long. And then she went to start the car, but we kissed some more, and then she did start the car and we left.

Light shone in a helix between the two high dark green curtains that had been drawn close. There was a wrinkled woven crease that joined them. On the bed but not yet in it, and she reached down, questioning, assessing gently, drawing deeper. And I spoke into her chest and then, where there had been one pale medallion, and then the other, as she gazed off toward the window, with eyes closed. Then she lifted one leg in the air while the other was two sides of a triangle on the dark blue bed cover. And I grasped both her legs and drew them around me and she spoke out, as though to space itself, her voice as though struggling, high-pitched, and she pushed harder against me while wrapping her legs around me very tight, linking her ankles behind. And then we turned over so that she was on top and I touched her nipples and held her breasts cupped in my palms. She rode my hips with her own and then shoved herself down onto me arching up as though she would look at the ceiling, and then – suddenly, strangely – she flung herself down onto me, limp and somehow defeated, pressing her face into my chest, weeping. She was weeping, shaking and shaking with tears. “WHY?” she cried out, “…why, why…why can’t I have a lasting relationship…like everybody else does? Why why not…?” My chest was damp with some tears. I held her hips and ran my hands up and down her back. She slipped apart from me and lay on her side facing away. There had been such misery in her voice. I gave her her privacy. After a few moments she turned toward me – an awkward near-smile, embarrassed perhaps.

Then she crawled over onto my chest, draping herself there. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“That’s all right.”

It was the same hotel we had been in before, the first time we had been together. I knew I would love her forever. It would be worth any amount of trouble to stay with her, and I knew we would get married. It may seem strange, but that is what I knew.

Time passed and time passed. It was later by now, and she was tired. She was about to fall asleep, and I asked her. “You have to tell me what you’ve been doing.” I said. “You know perfectly well. Tell me.” She nudged her shoulder and murmured something unintelligible. “I love you,” she said after a moment. “I love you…so much.” But that was all.

Night came and we slept there. Sometimes she was curled on her side at the edge of the bed, as though to keep away from me; at other times she pushed her face into my arm or rolled over toward me, as if to crawl up onto me. Faint sounds of traffic outside the window, Taipei simmering, cooling, quieting slowly. It happened that I had my pills with me, as I often did now, taking them not merely to sleep but to allay the gnawing obscure tensions that gripped me at odd times. And I got up and took several, washing them down with the bottled water the hotel provided. But it was a long time before I fell asleep.

She must have snuck out very quietly at some point. I must have been heavily asleep having been a bit drained by the whole thing and drugged as well. But there was a note placed on her side of the bed written on hotel stationary.

Nothing has gone right. Nothing, nothing has gone right.
I should not increase tragedy, it piles up and piles up.
I can’t help it though. I have to do this. Don’t pursue me, please please please.

CHAPTER 26

Evan sat in an armchair smoking, glancing over now and then, seemingly preoccupied. Martin sat near him, his legs stretched out. Jim sat near Evan. He too seemed distracted, somewhat troubled. Stacey sat nearer to me. Tseng, the rather hostile actor, was also there, sitting as though twisted up in his black suit jacket and black pants, smoking. I had tried to call Pei-Wen, but for whatever reason she could not be reached. So then I called Stacey instead. She picked me up and drove me there. She was silent, mostly intent on driving. I glanced at her now and then, her broad rather oval face lit by the dashboard and the passing streetlights. Now we were in the living room of the large fashionable apartment where we had met the trafficked girls. I didn't know why we were here. Other than our small group, the place was deserted. I glanced at the large room opposite to where we sat, where Mei-Hwa had been interviewing the girls and the long hallway to the right which they had emerged from, having been led from their rooms by the madame. And I remembered the physical assault. But it was all empty now, as though no one had ever been there. I thought of echoes and silence. There were no echoes of course, but there was silence.

Jim came out of his revery and looked at me, smiling. "How are things going with your money issues at the university?" The others were all looking at me rather intently. The couches had been moved closer to the central table, and I did feel as though I were a bit cornered. "About the same," I said. "Things seem rather stuck. Not clear what the situation is exactly." He nodded. "Yes, many things here are like that." The others looked at him. "Yes," I said. "It would seem so." Then a mood of irritated impatience came over me. Something was being evaded – absurdly so, I suddenly thought.

“Where is Mei-Hwa? does anyone know?” I said and looked at each of them. “How is your relationship with her?” Martin asked. I was silent for a moment. Tseng looked at me intently. Stacey was uncomfortable. Evan blew a plume of smoke over his left shoulder, almost as a way to lighten the mood. “Well do you know?” I said. “I don’t know where she is,” Jim said. His attitude was like a doctor conveying bad news.

“Is she with Linn?” I said. There was a ripple of tension. “No,” Evan said as he leaned forward to grind out his cigarette in the ashtray on the table. He blew smoke as he did and wagged his head back and forth amid a gray filmy wreathe.

“We really don’t know,” Jim said.

“Well, is she all right? Is she safe?”

“Yes yes yes,” Martin rose part way from his seat leaning forward sweeping both hands back and forth as though adjusting two invisible dials. “She’s ok. No worries.” The others were momentarily frozen. There was a silent adjustment and then a decision to put the best possible face on it.

“How do you know?” I said.

“It’s not your business, ok?” Tseng said. “We don’t have to explain everything to you!” he shouted. “You’re a troublemaker. Just like every American. You come in here. Everything has to be just like you say.”

“Wait, wait,” Martin said. Jim and Evan looked on. Stacey stared at a point on the floor.

“Why are you going to this lawyer?” Tseng said. “You are trying to do things against Linn? Right?” his arm flew up as though tossing me a ball. “I don’t know what you mean,” I said. And I genuinely didn’t. “Well, you know,” Jim said, “he has many people who don’t like him. His political – you know – activities….” He hesitated a moment. Evan was shaking his head in agreement. Stacey straightened up. “It’s a bad…situation,” she said, sweeping some of her hair away from her face. “There might be a girl…who will say that he did…something…. Many people would pay attention. But of course, not true.”

“Some people think you are behind this, you know,” Jim said.

“People think what?”

“They think you are CIA,” Tseng said.

“CIA!” I couldn’t help but laugh out loud. They didn’t laugh though. Even Martin had an unamused expression. Stacey had returned her gaze to the floor. “That’s ridiculous,” I said. “We know,” Jim said. Again, Evan nodded in agreement. “Yes,” he added.

“You do?” I said.

“Yes.”

I wondered what this meant but said nothing. “You suspect a possible – you know the expression – smear campaign?”

“Yes, we know the expression,” Evan said. “That he either had adultery or maybe this student. You know,” Stacey said.

“What girl?” I asked.

“No one you know,” she said. “Not one of your students,” she said giving me a reassuring sympathetic glance. But I couldn’t help but wonder if this was true.

“We want you to help.”

“Help?” I said.

“She will open up to you. You are both Americans,” Stacey said.

“Who will? I’m sorry…”

“This professor Kate. You know her,” Jim said. Stacey looked at me and raised her eyebrows.

“Yes of course I know her. So what about her?” There was a moment of silence. Stacey looked at Evan, who looked at Jim. Tseng seemed to be sneering inwardly, but did nothing, said nothing.

“We need to know how she gets along with different people.”

“Linn,” Stacey clarified. “Also your girlfriend. Does this Kate talk about her?”

“No,” I said. “They knew each other before?” I asked. Stacey seemed to want to evade this but then nodded yes.

“What about Linn? Mei-Hwa knows him. From when? For how long?” But there was another awkward silence. “Since college,” Stacey said. “You probably know,” she said, almost by way of soft rebuke.

“Will you?” Jim asked.

“I’m not sure I can do that,” I said. They seemed not to be especially disappointed nor even particularly surprised. I rose and we exchanged pleasantries all around. Stacey rose and took my arm, to my surprise, and we left together and she drove me back to my place.

“Where is she?” I said. We were parked by the side of the road. The night was warm. The trees rippled with a breeze that had many fragrances in it. The body of Taiwan was starting to disrobe. There were handfuls of stars and a hazy full moon. “I don’t know,” she said. “Really. But I know she is all right.”

“She’s with Pei-Wen, right?”

“I don’t know really.”

“At their place? Let’s go there now. Come on.” Her eyes widened in the darkness. “I can’t, I can’t. Ok?” It was as if she was afraid of something. And so I didn’t press the issue. “All right,” I said. I gave her hand a squeeze. She nodded and smiled. I got out and went back to my place.

D. sat at the wooden table where she had spread out the tea service. Little flecks of light from the high windows caught her black hair. We had finished one of our lessons. She poured out some light-yellow tea into both small cups. “I think you have been very sad lately.” She made a little ducking movement of her head on the word ‘sad.’

“Maybe,” I said.

“Have you been sleeping all right?”

“Yes,” I said, “I’m all right.”

“Ok,” she said as she raised her cup to her lips, holding it with her fingertips. “Are you going to still live in Taipei?”

“I don’t know.”

"Hmm, back and forth. Very tire."

"Yes. Tiring."

"Tiring," she repeated and made a little bow as though with just her nose.

"I brought you some *feng li su*. Kind you like." And she brought a package of pineapple cakes from her handbag on the floor and set several gold foil cubes on the table. "Thank you," I said. "You are welcome," she said and smiled her almost childlike smile. "You need to have more rest time. Too much go back and forth. Taipei, too much distraction. Maybe bad influence." She shook her head and gave me a sidelong glance. "Hmm," I somewhat agreed. She sat beside me in silence for a while, in her still, contained way, sipping her tea. After a few minutes, during which we spoke Mandarin with each other – a little test on her part – she gathered her things and began to take her leave. "Very good," she said, and patted the back of my hand with the flats of four fingers and rose to let herself out. I saw her to the door, and she made her slight bow at the open door and slipped out. I sat back down and the feeling came over me, like a wave, that I would never see Mei-Hwa again. It seemed quite unlikely that I ever would. She had decided something and had told me in her note. There was no other reason for her to have done that.

After I'd finished with my afternoon seminar and the last of my students and left, my assistant Eileen knocked and let herself in. She said there was a message left for me at the department office. It was a message written in Chinese by the secretary and Eileen translated it for me as the two of us stood in the middle of the office. I could have read it myself, but I let her do it anyway. She seemed to feel it was very important. It instructed me to call an unfamiliar number, which, after Eileen had left, I did. A strange voice answered in Chinese and then switched to English. "I have to tell you… first, my name is Jane. We didn't meet, but I know Stacey. And others. And they said to tell you that Mei-Hwa has been threaten…threatening…to commit suicide."

“When did this happen? where is she?” There was a silence. Then she said, “She just started to do this…saying she was going to do that. Other day. I’m not sure.”

“Where is she?”

“They didn’t say.”

“So what am I supposed to do?”

“Some other people will come to see you tonight. At your place. Around 7.”

Later that afternoon I received a note from Pei-Wen. She told me that Mei-Hwa was convinced that I had been cheating on her with Brit. Evidently it was Brit herself who confronted her, throwing it in her face. I was puzzled and shocked. This was the reason Mei-Hwa was so distraught? if indeed she was. I couldn’t help but be somewhat skeptical. But then I recalled being told by Brit that she had threatened suicide before, but I didn’t know if that itself was true. Was I going to see Mei-Hwa again after all? I didn’t know what to think, but I was afraid for her safety. I had to know where she was, and if she was all right. During the bus trip back to Taipei I could think about nothing but these things. The landscape went past, dimmed by night, the heavy glass of the window a kind of portal. In the glass I saw bits of my reflection, but it was her face that I was seeing. I could think of nothing but Mei-Hwa, and I knew I had to find her.

CHAPTER 27

Crowds clotted about the stalls, the light putting a faint yellow glow on sections, even as pieces drifted off. Pedestrians in a different dark blue light made cris-cross patterns in the pedestrian concourse. There was a quiet restlessness, the Brownian motion of the crowd. Perhaps something unexpected was building up in the people, in the country. Mei-Hwa was always trying to capture some of it, I thought. Then the bell rang, and I let them in, greeting them at the top of the stairs.

Stacey came in along with two other young women – they introduced themselves as students, but I had never seen them before. I motioned for them to take seats and they did, and we sat staring at each other for a moment. I didn't want to mention what Pei-Wen had told me, though I would have been curious to get Stacey's opinion. But I didn't want to do it with these unfamiliar faces present.

"Well," I said "where is Mei-Hwa? do you know?"

"It is a delicate situation," Stacey said. She had seemed to wince a bit at my initial bluntness, and I myself regretted it immediately. But it had just slipped out. One of the girls who sat next to her nervously shifted. She wore jeans and a black sweater, her long hair parted in the middle, had been dyed blond. Her companion was short, rather plump, with short cut hair and huge fishbowl glasses.

"How so?" I said. Stacey seemed to have been hesitating.

"It is complicated."

"I want to see her."

"They want you to stay away."

"Why? Who wants?"

"She has friends who are taking care of her."

"Brit told her lies," I said.

She said nothing but her eyes widened.

"That I cheated with her, that we were involved."

"They want you to stay away," she said.

The two girls gave me wide-eyed stares and nodded just slightly. I couldn't help but wonder who they were. "She's with them," Stacey repeated.

"She's with Linn?"

"No, no," Stacey said and shook her head emphatically. "She's away safe someplace. They're keeping watch."

"Away with whom?"

"Different friends, who helped her…at different times."

"I don't believe you." This too I rather blurted out. I was having a hard time keeping control of my emotions. The longer things went on, the more my love for her seemed to well up inside me. I didn't know what to do. After they left, I left.

The street was full of traffic, cabs were many. I raised my arm and one angled in near the crosswalk. The driver's hand rose in a salute in his dim fishbowl. "Ni hao," and a friendly sly glance in the mirror. He knew it all had to do with a woman. It was a long ride out to the place far in the southeastern edge of the city where she lived. Streets were tunnels lined with the dark cubes of buildings. Crowds of people at intersections, traffic crowding, jamming, reverberating, in a gathering dark. The lights of the city blaring, liquid in speed, falling past, and we were rising gradually, low hills around but hills with many houses ranged in row on row like burnt blackened dice cast down in cryptic figures. The sky was full of grey clouds, but there was a high pocked moon like a face upturned amid a sheet of silver rain. And then we were there. I paid, nodded thank you, and he raised his brief salute and drove off. Perhaps I should have asked the cab to wait, I thought, in case there was no one home at all. But I was at least expecting to find Pei-Wen there, since she and Mei-Hwa sometimes lived together. I didn't know why she hadn't answered my calls. I hadn't been here in a while. I opened the rickety wooden gate with its flaked off paint. Shrubs in the western manner and white flower vines, all wet. The grass-grown walk and the concrete step up to the door, and just then a light went on in the

hallway, a gold translucent pane, and Pei-Wen opened the door quickly and stepped forward as though to hold me. “What’s wrong?” I said.

“She’s crazy, all right?” She looked up at me as she clutched my arms with both hands, as though to hold me back “Who is? what do you mean?” Just then, behind her as though by way of an answer, Brit ran out. “Why are you here?” she shouted. She was unsteady on her feet but ran out onto the lawn where she stumbled onto the grass. She wore her tight designer jeans, a frilly white blouse, and black spike heels. It was incongruous to see this elegant, beautiful woman in her contrived and expensive clothes rolling around drunk on the grass which was blue green in a darkness diluted with a bronze moonlight. Pei-Wen ran to her and helped her to her feet. But when she was standing, Brit yanked her arm away.

“Are you crazy?” Pei-Wen shouted at her, and for a moment I thought she was going to hit her. Brit seemed alarmed at this and stepped away. I had never seen Pei-Wen act like this.

“YOU!” Brit shouted at me, flinging an arm in my direction.

“Be quiet,” Pei-Wen said. “I’m disgusted by you! Look what you’ve done.”

“What have I done?” Brit said. Pei-Wen said nothing. Then she moved in an exaggerated vamp sway toward me. “Come here,” she said and stepped backward into the shadow of the tree that stood at the edge of the yard. She held out the fingertips of one hand. I thought it was best to humor her, so I let her draw me forward. Then she opened the front of her blouse. As so often, she wore no bra. A graphite lace of leaf shadows shivered on her sternum and her breasts. Her nipples were the color of oxblood.

“Do you love me? Tell me.”

“Why did you lie?”

“I didn’t lie. You know you want me.” then she took a deep breath and looked up into the tree branches.

“Come on,” I said, “close up your blouse.” She pulled the leaves of it around her, covering herself with its rags and her forearms. Pei-Wen came over, stepping softly. “Come,” she said,” come.”

“No,” Brit said. And she buttoned up. “I’m going to stay here under the tree,” she said, as though it were a perfectly reasonable choice. As though one should say I’ll have a coffee, no crème.

“All right,” I said to Pei-Wen. “Let’s go.” She hesitated, glanced at Brit, who was looking down at the grass, and led me toward the house. Just as we got to the door, Brit ran toward us and threw herself in front of the door. She and Pei-Wen struggled in the half-open door and I separated them. Pei-Wen fell to the landing and scraped the heel of one hand. “Get up,” I said, helping her. I let her lead me off and we both walked toward the street. Brit followed us but then collapsed onto the lawn as she had before.

“You think you want Mei-Hwa. You don’t know what she is. You don’t know. You’ll never know. You’re just a foreigner.” Then she lay face down in the grass sobbing.

“We’d better see to her,” I said.

“No, no. She’ll be all right, believe me.” And she led me away down the road. We walked out to where the street met the main drag and just then a cab happened to be passing by. We got in the back. I gave my address to the driver. We went on in silence for a while. I glanced at her a few times, but she remained looking straight ahead. She was resolving on something, I felt, not merely thinking. In the dark back set with streetlight cutting through at intervals her profile seemed stamped in silver like a coin. To my surprise she drew a cigarette from her purse and passed it back and forth under her nose. She saw me looking at her and gave me a little smile.

“Tell me,” I said. In response, she gave my hand a squeeze. “Later,” she said. I knew then that I would never see Mei-Hwa again. She had decided. And these others were ushering me, as diplomatically as possible, out of her life.

CHAPTER 28

Mist rags flowed through a pathway in the sky that was a clouded mirror held over the river's surface. There was a half-moon that was a tilted goblet the stars waited to drink from as the smoke-like clouds revealed and concealed them. There were the high chalky cliffs on the opposite shore. It was the same place in Hsindien where Mei-Hwa and I had met. But this time it was Pei-Wen who had come toward me from out of a trough of damp mist that had lingered on the river's shore, like a forest spirit out of the ground. We were near the restaurant where I had first met Mei-Hwa. She led me across the rope bridge. There were not many people around, and for some reason she wanted to talk to me in this way.

Partway across she turned, and we stopped. She glanced at me briefly then looked out toward the river, looking down hundreds of feet onto the

black water. There were a few small white boats seeming to be still as though they were figures etched in dark stone. “So,” she said. And turned back toward me. “I want you to know she is all right.” She was unsmiling, rather grave. “Naturally, the other night, it was quite insane. So…I wanted you to know.”

“All right,” I said. “I guess I have to believe you.”

“I think she really loves you,” she said. “But…” She hesitated and looked back out toward the river. Then she turned to look at me and straightened her shoulders but glanced sideways slightly. There were passersby, vague dark shapes, not near. “But what?” I asked. I had the impression that she was hesitant to let me into a certain inner chamber, a secret group that must naturally conceal itself, wary of infiltration. I recalled the fantastic accusation of Tseng, and it was not clear to me that she herself did not believe it.

“But there are so many other things she has to do.”

“Did she try to commit suicide before?”

She was startled and seemed to swallow hard a moment. “No,” she said, shaking her head, and then looked away, back toward the river. Then she looked up at the night sky with its clouds and moon and scattered occasional stars. Other people were about, moving in both directions, couples, single people, but not very numerous. In the dark they were dim shapes, silent, or talking softly. She seemed wary of eaves droppers.

“Brit said she did.”

An electricity went through her and she tossed her head. “She’s a liar. You see how she lies.”

“Mei-Hwa’s with Linn now?” I said.

“No, no.”

“They had an affair.” I said, stating rather than asking.

“No.” She was emphatic. She was intent on nailing in place a certain picture. But in her mind it was dangerously slipping. “He was not involved like that with her. He was just very important teacher… in political action.

But…” She took a cigarette case out of the pocket of her coat and drew one out. There was the flash of her lighter, her forehead tinted briefly. And then a thin veil of fragrant smoke drawn aside by the wind.

“Both very for independence of Taiwan, you know – and, yes, you know how it is –
politicians who want independence, caught with girls, prostitutes or boy maybe, who knows…
lots of strange things.”

“Targeting Linn?” I asked.

She looked down and dropped her cigarette. It twinkled orange and she set her shoe on it, softly but heavily. “Yes,” she said reluctantly. Then she looked at me, “Adultery or sex with student smear. They both are afraid of this.”

“Linn and Mei-Hwa?

“Yes. But not because, you know…”

“Yes, ok.”

“This is why we asked – threat comes maybe from someone at your school. People pay attention.”

“Who?” She ignored this.

“They pay attention to him and to what he is going through. Taiwan still police state. Same people around, different approach. Foreign groups too. And we know about rumors about recruiting girls.”

“He knows about all this?”

“He knows yes, sure. But he might have been not understanding some things. But he is a good person, however rude and ill-mannered he might be to you and his very bad feelings toward the US and all that – he is a good person though – underneath his prickly exterior he wants what’s best for Taiwan for Mei-Hwa also. His books are very interesting. He’s very smart. Without people like him, the movement, the revolution if you want to call it that, would have lost its way.”

“Linn studied in the US?”

“Didn’t like, hates US ever since…some kind of bad experience. And then, Viet Nam war, you know…”

“Yes, I know,” I said.

“He has guilt, I think.”

“You know him?

“Yes, sure.”

“Guilt from what?”

“He led her into these things. It has been hard on her. You know…how she is.”

We were both silent for a moment. A few people passed by going up ahead to where the bridge reached its height, and the two high masts were like gates into the moonlit night itself. There were fewer clouds. The moon shone down steadily, and the white cliffs of the opposite shore were given a strange blue grey tint, as though they were made of ash.

“Can you help? Do you know who it could be, there at your school?

“I wouldn’t know anything like that,” I said.

“Yes, ok,” she said. She seemed disappointed in what appeared a rather ingenuous way. As we walked back, she asked again if I had any way to find such information, and again I said no. But I wondered what this request really meant. I had been let into an inner chamber, but my blindfold had not yet been removed. People passed like beads being released at random from a necklace, dim forms – auras of ash-white, military green, matte black, and then the shower of averted gazes diminished to a trickle, and then we were alone again. She stopped and looked about, straightening herself and standing square to me. We faced each other. The bright moon was in the bridge’s invisible high sails. She took a breath and then opened up her coat and then her blouse itself, a sand-colored silken sheath and then her left breast was bare, the faint striations of her chest, like faint grey depressions in snow, and then she drew it past her nipple. She was very still, looking at the walkway. Then she closed her blouse and then her coat. Her nipple would have been about the size of a half dollar. It would have

been. And there were other scars. She looked me in the face. We walked on. “Where would you like to go,” I said. “Just home,” she said. We took a cab home riding in a dark silence. It slowed to a curb and I got out, after polite good byes. I knew that one threshold after another had been crossed.

A day or two later I had more business to do at my office – some papers, some paperwork, some students to meet with. In the late morning a heavy rain fell thick, clear drops whipped through by invading wind-curtains. I went out with my black umbrella, holding tight to it, fighting a wind that came and went, warm spray in my face sometimes. Light was bright grey but at times unsteady. The dark interior of the bus had a subdued feel, as though people had been slightly dazed. An hour later, disembarking at the university stop, the storm was different, more still, emulsion-like, with fizzy silver wires and sparkling icicles from the points of buildings or from trees’ heavy dark branches.

In my office, I adjusted the curtains and then sat down to go through some forms and other things. I couldn’t help but think about the things I had seen and had been shown. I realized that I could not stay, after all. The idea had been delusion. The struggles going on beneath the surface, or perhaps one would say, in dark crevasses and recesses, of the place, the island, were things I could never really understand and about which I could do nothing – a trio of ragged young women sitting on a mattress, trading cigarettes and sips of whiskey, or indeed the visceral rage in a girl in white flinging herself at a startled matron, her sometime boss. They had asked me to help, presumably by gathering and conveying information. But this seemed absurd to me. But they had indeed asked. Were they really serious? It was a test perhaps. On one hand I could hardly believe it, but, ultimately, what did know? I had left the issue in limbo. But now I decided to announce a stand, a position. I disliked leaving them hanging. I had no idea what they would ask, precisely, for after all they had been entirely vague. But now I decided that I would agree to help them. In part I was curious about their

reaction, and I wondered what effects, what reactions, in other regions there might be. And what would all that, finally, tell me?

Students appeared at my door. I was almost surprised, I had been for such a long while lost in thought. Eileen was their leader and she squeezed herself around the edge of the door, smiling, amused at my absent mindedness, and she tossed her head down in a little chop, her bangs shaking. “Hello?” she asked.

“Yes, hi. Yes, come in.” And she stepped around the edge of the door, pushing it open wide as she did, and several others crowded in behind her. “Turn that light on,” I said. And she snapped the switch on the wall near the door. The room became a bright cube. Outside it was still raining heavily. I had left a couple of windows open. I hadn’t noticed the damp sprays coming in. Lilian went to close them both. The rest had taken up places around the large meeting table. It was a session of the translation group, and it was productive and beautiful, as was always the case. They were wonderful students. After a bit, everyone was settled, and the session began. Phrase after phrase of these elegant poems was isolated, held up to the light, and then set back down in an English equivalent. I was the arbiter of how they “sounded” in English, how well they “worked.” “No, it’s too choppy,” Jean said about a certain phrasing. “No, I like it,” Evangeline said. “I think she’s expressing the…” Here she paused glancing upward as though to find her thought near the ceiling – “the wrenching quality, of her love.” “Yes,” Francis agreed and nodded while holding a hand against her face. The two guys Vincent and Mike sat up straight, somewhat distanced from the conversation, until Francis teased them. “I notice the men don’t want to comment.” They both smiled but said nothing. “They are afraid of woman feelings,” Evangeline said looking at them and sucked down on a suppressed a giggle. The other girls laughed and Vincent said, “You are very creative,” and he waved his hands back and forth “…in how you translate.” “Well, they are love poems,” Lillian said, “They have to sound intimate.” “Ok,” Vincent said, and he and Mike smiled, acquiescing. The

girls all laughed. It was a good place to end I thought, since we'd been at it for about two hours. So they all gathered their things, and after pleasantries they got up and left. Eileen lingered behind, though.

"What is it?" I said.

"They have some things to tell you."

"Yes, all right." Then they all came in and sat down. They were quiet and contained. The rain continued outside and the illuminated cube of the office seemed to be afloat in a gray sea of drizzle and mist. "Well," Vincent said, "there are…you know – "

Stacey broke in "how we told you before – "

Eileen nodded confirming "that they were saying bad things about you, spreading rumors…"

"Yes I remember."

"Well now is worse."

"They say you have girls at your apartment to…you know…." Vincent said.

"More than one at a time even," Stacey added, her eyes wide.

"What girls? Where are the girls that would even do that?" I said.

"They spread rumors about us." Stacey said.

Eileen nodded and was visibly upset. The rain was outside. It seemed to be louder.

"And others too, even by name," she said

I couldn't say anything for a moment. I looked at them, two serious young men, three young women, idealistic, worried, frightened even. "I'm sorry you've been dragged into this," I said. I told them I would try to see what was going on, and I told them to do nothing and to say nothing in the meantime.

I had various things to do at the library, and then a class, and so a few hours later I was back in my office. It was now the late afternoon. I had left my door ajar. Sounds from the hallway came in, people passing, some students rushing in a panic of lateness, low discussions nearby, sometimes

laughter. And then there was a familiar voice in one of the interactions, speaking perfect mandarin, laughing a bit, and then immediately after, giving my door a very solid thump. It sounded like a kick, but it was the edge of a fist. It was Dr. Gretchen and she opened the door to half and stood in it, one hand on the jamb, one on the doorknob, leaning in. Her gray-yellow hair was a conjuries of frothy whisps. She wore pale jeans and a sheer blouse of dark yellow.

“Hey,” she said. “Are you free to talk?”

“Sure.”

She tossed her head as though to say, ‘Ok, let’s do it’ and came in, closing the door after her. Then she took the seat near the desk. She was still for a moment, considering, thinking where to start. She looked at me, seemed to study me for a moment and then started in.

“Well as you know I’ve been trying to help with your money situation, I mean your long range status.”

“Yes, I know.” She blinked to acknowledge.

“After you no longer are active.”

“Yes. Right.”

“So it’s a tricky difficult thing.”

She was looking more at my thigh than at me. Then she came back, her blue eyes somewhat wide. There were red edges in her lower lids and I noticed once more how red and wind-sanded her cheekbones were. “But I think there’s progress.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” she shot back with her chin. “I think so.” And then confiding, “certain people are being…let’s say I’m addressing them.”

“Addressing?”

“They present peculiar problems. But now there’s this other issue. These rumors. Bizarre. Have you been told yet?” She eyed me in an assessing way.

“Some of my students were just here.”

“Yes, right,” she said. It was as though she had known but was just remembering. “Well this – this kind of thing – could be very damaging. I don’t need to tell you. You know the sorts of attitudes they have.” And then suddenly, “Is any of it true?”

“Of course not.”

“Good,” she said. But almost as a warning. “I know how to fix all that.”

“How?”

“I know what this is. I know…who….”

“Are you going to say?”

“No, I can’t.”

“The girls are being defamed,” I said. “They’re even naming them they said.”

“Oh lord.”

“Yes. Right.”

“I will –” She nodded her head. “I will take care of this. Believe me.”

“Thank you. I’ll be in your debt.”

She smiled and said “I suppose…”

“How will I repay you?” We both suppressed a chuckle.

She stretched herself in an almost feline way, arching her shoulders up in the direction of the wall behind the desk. “Well, I don’t know,” she said. “I’ll have to think of something. But I have to go soon to oversee some foreign students I’ve brought in.”

“Are they all girls?” I said. She became alert and straightened in her seat.

“Yes, in fact –”

“I think I met a few,” I said.

“Did you?”

“Yes,” I said. “Are they all from Ukraine?”

“I don’t think I’d pursue this,” she said. She sat upright in her chair and was looking straight to the side, toward the bookcases. I could see her

face reflected there, and mine as well at an angle to it. We both saw each other, there in the glass, in its dimension of the transparent.

“No?” I said.

“No.”

“Who’s behind my problems? Is it Linn?” Her mood darkened still more.

“No. You’re reoccupied with him.”

“Not really.”

“You get this from your friends you have. Or your girlfriend. As you think of her.”

I wondered if she had knowledge of where Mei-Hwa was. “What do you mean ‘as I think of her?’ She was silent, I could see different avenues being assessed. In the interim, images flashed through my mind. I thought I would be deliberately provocative, to see how she would react. “How long have you and Linn been involved?” I said. She was startled at this. I could see wheels turning in her mind. I knew she was about to lie.

“For a while,” she said very promptly. “A year. Maybe more. Off and on. She’s jealous, I think. She used to be with him. He’s a very imposing man, you know. Tall, as you know. Powerful, in many ways. She’s not going to be able to forget all that, at any level. I wouldn’t be able to, I know. There could be dangers in asking questions along these lines. Being with certain people. Going to certain places.” And with that she got up and left and closed the door behind her quietly. It was beginning to get late. I got up and closed the lights, gathered some things, and left.

The next day I called Pei-Wen and told her that I had decided to do what they had asked. She was surprised at my decision. She asked what had changed my mind and I could only say that I felt a responsibility, and this was true, though, I knew there would have been little of importance that I could contribute. And yet perhaps I was wrong in this regard. It could be that my very interaction with Gretchen would itself be something they would find helpful. And yet I knew I would never do anything like that. I was

deceiving Pei Wen now in telling her that I would, that I was willing. But it was a deception that I felt was necessary. In truth *I* wanted information from *them*. She seemed impressed with what I told her, but I couldn't say if this was real. I couldn't tell if anything was, except a certain few things. Then I said that I had also decided to not follow through with the lawyer Brit had taken me to. This part was true, and she seemed relieved. "Thank you," she said. As we spoke, my own words had reminded me of her – Brit – and I couldn't help but think of her. So many images of her flashed through my mind.

Later that evening I went out for a walk around the edge of the campus, the same remote walking trail that ringed it, leading up toward the surrounding hills. It was windy. A net of hydras was flung about the road and swam in ragged pools of moonlight. The road was dark then graphite-bright by turns, and more wind gusts banished the hydras and a momentary calm tossed doilies of shadow across a moon landscape of asphalt and sharp crumbled rock. The moon slashed its razor through the pulsing water weeds of the treetops, the bamboo clicked and tapped, and of a moment the road became still and tunnel-like, overseen by black lace work that murmured around and spread a paisley cloak over the way. Up ahead, amidst its weaving, a small disturbance flashed dimly, a piece of bead work emerging, then holding, liquidly moving. It was a woman walking toward me, keeping to the very edge of the road most deeply submerged, her legs moving purposefully. I switched to the opposite side to be considerate, and then I saw that it was Kate.

She came out of the shadows and walked across the road. She peered at me and then recognized me suddenly. Both sets of fingertips went to her mouth with its "o" like a figurine singer, and she bent both knees, a kind of curtsy to Surprise itself. Then she came to me and put both hands on my two wrists.

"How are you?"

"I'm fine, Kate, how are you?"

She searched her mind for a moment then looked straight at me. “I’m fine,” she said and blinked as though with her whole face. “What are you doing here by yourself?”

“Well, I could ask you that,” I said, “and you’re a girl.”

“A girl,” she laughed. “Am I? I guess I am,” she said and grinned at her own playfulness.

“You’re just taking a walk?

“Yes. Is something wrong?”

“A little maybe.”

She looked at me, her brow furrowed, ear as though cocked to listen afar. “Do I know?” she asked. “Let me guess. Your money. Your future… money…”

“Yes, but that’s an old story.”

“Yes,” she acknowledged. “Yes.”

“So…” I said.

“I’ve heard of rumors. Have you heard?” She leaned forward and she looked at me side long from under her brows.

“Yes,” I said.

“Who? “she whispered.

“Gretchen.”

“Naturally.” She tossed her hair back, looking up. The moon was in the tree we stood beneath. The branches writhed upward silently. More wind and the upper leaves flashed gray. “Or unnaturally,” she finally said. She looked at me, a driven look like a drill.

“Yes,” I said. “Well my students beat me to it. A few of them.”

“They love you.”

“I guess.”

“What are you doing? Listen,” she said and clutched my arm. I felt her nails. Then she fell partway forward, using me for balance. She was crying, but stifling it, her shoulders shaking. I was startled and still.

“We are trying desperately to do something here. Something very important. I love you, but you’re creating complications. Not your fault,” she said as she struck my arm with a loose fist.

“Please leave,” she said. “Please leave. Go back.”

“I can’t,” I said.

“Yes, you can. I know how you feel. That place is dreadful. This place is troubled, but beautiful. There is a chance here.”

“For what?” I said.

“For human life.” By this point she had moved away and stood with one foot on the artery of the tree’s secret heart, buried beneath the ground. “Go back and take your girl with you. She wants to go there.”

“For what reason though does she want to?”

“For different reasons,” she said as she faced me directly, both hands in her pockets. She was serious, and unsmiling.

“That’s what I mean,” I said

“It would be good if you’d go along with that,” she said. I couldn’t gauge her expression, which seemed strangely remote.

“No,” I said. “No. But I will leave. Just not right now.”

She took a breath and moved farther away, her arms crossed now before her chest. She nodded and then turned to step carefully around the tree roots. “Bye bye,” she called back without looking and giving me a brief wave of her fingertips with the hand of the arm wrapped about her body.

CHAPTER 29

Pei-Wen sat in my living room. She wore an ochre-colored dress that wrapped her like a large leaf all the way to the middle of her calves. She sipped her tea, looking about the room as she did, as though she was expecting something hidden in the corners. Then she rummaged in a large sack-like black bag, opening the palm of one hand toward me as a question, asking permission. I nodded ok and she drew out a pack of cigarettes, lit one and started smoking. Evan sat at the opposite end of the couch and opened a hand as though checking for rain and after a moment two threads of smoke rose up into the room's light. Jim sat in a chair opposite, facing them and at an angle to mine. The door buzzed and he rose and went with large strides across to let the person up. He disappeared onto the landing and closed the door partially behind him and there was a brief murmur of voices. Then he and Tseng stepped in. Jim smiling in his usual way, Tseng

nodded gravely to me and in a more affable way to the others. Jim let him have his chair and took a place between Pei-Wen and Evan.

"So," Jim started in, "Pei-Wen has told us –"

"I called her," I said. "I told her. I'm very…"

"Yes," he said wagging his head up and down as though it were a pump. "That is natural, understandable."

"Did you tell him everything?" I said to Pei-Wen.

"Yes, I did," she said, blinking, surprised at the question. "Of course," she added.

"Well..," I said. "This is very alarming to me."

"Of course, of course."

"Yes," Pei-Wen added and glanced at Tseng, but he was silent.

"Look," Tseng said

"No no no," Pei-Wen stopped him, waving both hands before her as though clearing water. "No, let's not."

"What am I supposed to do?" he countered

"All right, all right," Jim chopped both hands down from his temples to near his knees. He was suddenly the umpire.

"What were you saying?" I asked Tseng, but he didn't answer.

"Where does all this come from?" I asked the three of them.

"Where you came from," Tseng said without looking at me.

"That's not fair," Pei-Wen said. She sat with one leg crossed over the other, elegant and composed, though emanating disapproval.

"It was one thing," I said, "when it was just me, though that was bad enough. But now the girls – these are innocent young girls, they are being dragged into this. Who knows how they're going to be affected. In their mind, in their *life*! Their reputation…maybe even their family…" I stopped. They were all startled and sat silent. Evan drew on the last of his cigarette, his eyes squinted up. I felt like he was drawing a bead on me.

"We know about it. We can address it," Jim said.

"How can you get them back their reputations?"

“No one will believe anything like that. These kinds of things,” Pei-Wen said.

“This garbage we see,” Evan put in. “We know it from –” and here he made a gesture with one arm as though pushing something toward the wall. “– a long time.”

“Was this the plan for Linn?” I said.

“Yeah sure,” Jim said. “We know what to do. We can intervene. We know who the guilty party is.”

“Who is it?”

“I cannot say right now. We have to be careful.” He looked at me, a professional giving a technical assessment. He was seriousness itself. I always had had a positive feeling about him. We seemed to understand each other at a certain level, and I knew now that I could trust him.

“I know who their parents are. I know their families. I know these girls,” Pei-Wen said. “I know who they are.”

I still wondered why Tseng was there and I had developed a different view of Evan now. “Will you contact the university?” I said. “Not now,” Pei-Wen said. “We will though, we will. Don’t worry about the girls. But what about you?”

“I had decided not to pursue things with that lawyer.” They nodded acknowledging and an element of relief could yet not elude their efforts of concealment. I felt that I knew many things now but that I could not articulate it all, even to myself. “Maybe I should go back to her now.”

“That might be for later,” Pei-Wen said. “But not now. Ok?”

“Yes, all right,” I said.

“Where is Brit?” I said. Pei-Wen fiddled with the butt of her cigarette in the ash tray I had acquired for these occasions. Evan’s was there also, two spent things burnt, twisted, lying beside each other. “She is fine,” Pei-Wen announced. Tseng glanced at me and nodded to emphasize. I could see that Brit was sleeping with him. Along with whoever else. Did he know? I had to wonder.

“She is working a lot,” he said.

“I see.”

It was not long before they all took their leave. Jim shook my hand firmly. Evan did too, but in a different way. Tseng nodded as he went past toward the door and Pei-Wen smiled and glanced at me. I recalled the moment on the bridge, and she knew that I did.

That was the evening before. Now it was the following afternoon. I was in my office, looking out the window. The weather was hot and bright. The roofs of the buildings beyond shined and glittered with heat. The sky was without clouds and filled with the sun to its very limits. Shadows below were sharp, precise, like knife cuts. Surfaces floated and burned amid illusory auras. The sun was constructing the place out of mathematical proportions and neutral bright objects yet with a dark or invisible mystery beneath. I was waiting for the time when Lu would be in his office. For one thing, I had to deliver a box full of exam books to him. It was the end of the school year now and the seniors had had to take a special exam before they graduated. Grading a portion of them was my job and he needed to collect them. But there were other things as well. I went from the window back to my desk, checked over the box of exam books, then sat down, passing the time by browsing around on the computer. All the different images, I thought, but who can predict what they are all connected to.

Finally, it was time and I gathered up the box and made my way down the several corridors until I was at his office door. It was somewhat ajar and I wrapped with two knuckles, just enough to be heard.

“Yaa, ok,” he said in English. Then “come in” in a hoarse voice.

I stepped in. “Hey,” he said. He was standing near the window, the vertical blinds half cracked. He wore dark brown slacks with a pink dress shirt. “Oh you have the exams. Good. Any problem with them?” He swam for a moment in pleated light and then was placing three fingers on the desktop as he dug through the box with the other hand, counting up.

“No everything’s fine,” I said

“Everybody pass. Good. Sit down.” He gestured to a chair like opening a cape.

“Well I have been having some trouble.”

He settled in his desk chair. “What? Trouble. What kind?” he said, his forearms flat on the chair’s arms. He rocked a little.

“Well there’s these rumors… you hear about?”

“Yes, Dr. Kate told me.”

“Told you when?”

“Maybe last week sometimes. I am not sure.”

“She told you the whole thing?”

“Yes, yes,” he mused, staring at the end of his shoe, while rocking. They were dull black dress shoes.

“Well,” I said, “someone is saying I bring female students to my apartment. For…”

“Yes ok.”

“You know –”

“Ok.”

“Orgies!” I said and had to laugh out loud. It was so ludicrous. “And now they are even listing different girls – you know, on this bulletin board they have. And even giving their names.” With this he was wide-eyed with startlement, and speechless.

“Oh my god,” he said. And then thinking – “No wait. We can deal with this.” And then his manner changed again. He leaned back in his chair, seeming to be seeing something on the opposite wall. “We can have ways to fix. Don’t worry,” he said as he fluttered one hand like a rag. “Don’t worry, don’t worry This just nuisance thing.”

“Nuisance?!”

“Prank. It’s prank. We will find out who is doing this.”

“I think I know,” I ventured. He looked at me in silence, sizing something up, his eyes vague behind thick glasses. “Well,” he said. “maybe, maybe not.”

“Is this what Linn was being threatened with?”

He shrugged like someone trying to don a jacket without using their hands. He was trying to make himself comfortable in the conversation. “Yaah well, he is complicated case. They don’t like what he does. Some people. Around.” He pointed one index finger toward the ceiling and moved it in expanding circles. “Or even some here. Some girl come and says whatever – he did this, that. Then he needs lawyers, two or three. A mess. Then he can’t pay. His type always need money. Communists, that’s why.” He leaned back and gave me a cheshire cat grin. “No, just kidding. So yah….”

“You gave him the money?”

“Yes sure, I had to. Different reasons. But this fitness review thing I got rid of that, don’t worry. Was joke. I don’t know about pension just yet.”

“Ok.”

“But don’t worry. I think it’s crazy. Neither Kate or Gretchen had this, why you? You know?”

“Yes.”

“They are working together?” I asked, without specifying.

“No,” he knocked the idea aside like a billiard ball. “No, they hate each other. Never speak. Always argue. You wouldn’t believe. In the past, yelling and scream. Yaah… she is going away again anyway, Gretchen. Just got back, now gone again.”

“Where?”

“Eh, who knows. Mongolia, Finland. Someplace. For her research. I think Ukraine. Poland maybe?... I don’t know. Doesn’t matter.” He was looking at the floor leaning forward as though inspecting his shoes after a shine. “We don’t know if she will be back. We don’t know what she’s been doing here.”

“Her and Kate,” I said stating, not asking.

“No,” he nodded. “I told you, they hate each other.”

“Eh what you think?” He stood straight and tapped his middle. “I’m losing weight.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Too many *bautze*. Sesame *bautze* my favorite. Any way.” And with this he guided me toward the door, one had tapping the back of my shoulder. “So don’t worry,” he said.

“What about the girls though?”

“We will take care, don’t worry. No one will take it seriously, so crazy. But I will meet with them, their parents, everything.”

As I walked back to my office, I couldn’t help but feel relieved. It was like being released from a strait jacket of anxiety and worry. Maybe I could stay after all, the thought crossed my mind, and a vista briefly opened. But I knew also of other factors. How much did Lu himself know? I had to wonder.

CHAPTER 30

It was now the beginning of the summer and the warm weather had set in. The windows were open, and a fragrant night breeze moved through the curtains. I was packing things up in boxes in preparation for moving. I had decided to leave Taipei. It had been a kind of illusion that had brought me. Now the illusion was dispersed, so it was time to go. One might see it as a retreat. In a way it was, but it was also a way of preparing for a further engagement. I needed to be closer to my work and more available to my students. And, of course, I felt that I had been drawn into something dangerous here, and I wondered how far it would go, or what I could do about it. But I had decided to deal with things on my own. So I moved about packing more things, setting this or that in the right box, securing objects around with paper towels and checking things off on a list I had. Then the phone rang. I answered and was surprised, really surprised, that it was her. Her voice was very low, hesitant, and a little hoarse at first.

“Hi,” she whispered. Then she cleared her throat and repeated herself, a bit more loudly. And I remembered this from before, this voice I had heard before. “Yes, hello,” I said. And then, as though daring to, I had to ask: “Where are you?”

“I’m at my place.”

“Yes, all right,” I said. And then added, “Good.” She laughed at this for a moment. “Why do you laugh?” I said. “I don’t know. It just seemed funny.” “Well, I was worried,” I said. There was a pause, and I wondered if she was still there. “I’m sorry,” she said, in a different tone, as though disclosing, and yet it was all unspoken. I noticed the sounds from outside. There were so many there. Who were they all? Where were they going? The boxes were on the floor, outlined by their shadows. “I’m sorry for everything. Really.” I was silent for a moment. “Ok?” she asked. And then, “Are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“Well…”

“What?” I asked after a moment.

“I was wondering if I could see you again. If we could…you know….” many things went through my mind. How much was unspoken in that phrase. “Yes,” I said, and after a pause, “All right.”

“Ok?” she said, as though to make sure.

“Yes, ok.”

In a little while she appeared at my door and we left in her car to – as it was unspoken and yet understood – to embark on a new life. For some philosophers, the appearance of the other person is a shattering of the world, and for some it is a luminous event, incomparable, indescribable, and which is a centerpiece for that world, and for some it is a startling, unexpected embodiment of the luminous, the Light, itself. But which was this, I had to wonder.

We were both almost silent on the way over. It was night now and the flow of traffic lights was skeins of glittering beads drawn past. And then

there was the remote part of the city and the hills approaching, the mostly silent entrance to a different plane. And we were there at the door to her house with its rickety fence so much like a piece of americana. It always amused me.

And then it was her bedroom, and her bed, and we spoke to each other without words, or with silent words which yet were not silent. And then it was morning, and we went to get breakfast, but of a sudden, she decided she would make it herself and so we walked a few blocks down the street to a small grocery store where we bought brown eggs, some fresh vegetables, fresh tofu, and some bread – like American bread but sweeter – and brought it all back. Her kitchen was on the first floor, a rather dark space with a gas stove and wooden table, and with sliding doors looking out on a patio. She made some omelets with fried tofu and toast. And we sat there eating, not talking much, and at times she would look over at me and smile but say nothing. We worked during the day, her in her room, I in a guest room. It was the summer now. And the air was quiet and still. Outside her front windows the trees were full and the flowers twined in the fence around the front yard were bright. Cumuli were tall-sailed ships floating in the depths of the sky. After a day or two she decided that we should make some day trips to different places. We decided on Dan Shui, a small port and tourist attraction north of the city. And we set out one morning, driving beneath a blue sky not yet hot. We walked around the small place crammed with stalls for all sorts of special foods and shops selling arts and crafts and tourist novelty items. Then we sat at an open-air eating place and looked out on the water that was black and heavy near the shore crammed with many small boats and silvery in the distance, eating special soup, an almost clear broth in which floated stuffed dumplings, she expressing approval of how it was done. I smiled at her, amused at her sudden food critic pickiness, and we both laughed. Later we went to visit the Spanish fort that was left by the Spanish in the 16th century. It was a squat heavy building, made of a stone that looked almost burnt orange. We walked around near the square

pillars, and there were many rows of flowers, blazing pink and yellow, set out around the stone walkways. How strange it seemed to see this remnant of Spain set here, and then I recalled the aboriginal people up in the hills, and the interest and concern she had about them and her articles and reporting about them, and it was as if you could see the flowing together of so many human currents in this one place. On another day we went back to the art museum we had visited before – it seemed strange to me that she wanted to do this – and we walked around the bright lit place, beneath its high windows and around the exhibits, and she played the same game of hide and seek with me, though this time it felt more like we were strolling about a graveyard. I remembered we had been watched surreptitiously by an unknown man. But there was no one like that now. That night we visited the same Vietnamese restaurant, her favorite, and sat there amid its flickering amber candlelight. The next day we stayed at home and worked. I was a bit restless, I suppose, and I moved from the guest room to the work room that she sometimes used, though now she was doing her things downstairs, her papers and computer set out on the kitchen table. I was surprised to find an array of photographs spread out on the floor, carefully arranged in groups. They were of her as a small child of about one or two years old. They were all black and white. She is a beautiful, rather plump baby: in one, she is sitting on a concrete floor, by herself. I couldn't help but feel that she looked abandoned. There were pictures of her standing, trying to walk, smiling at someone outside the frame – all of them of Mei-Hwa by herself. Then she appeared at the door, surprised that I was there and looking at it all, especially that set, and she laughed and then swept them all away, placing them in piles on the desk. I remembered how she had shown me other photos in this same room by flashlight.

Looking back, it seems to me as though there was a penumbra around every moment. What was reaching out through the bright look in her eyes when she greeted me? What was reaching out as she straightened her shoulders and arched her back slightly or as she turned her gaze aside and

downward, her hair falling loosely past her neck, amid the room's dimness, where a small light had been made to imitate a candle, near the bed's corner, and where shadows were playing cards tilted about the room's walls and ceiling, and we stood amid the illuminated house of cards.

And then she was beneath a thin sheet, her covered form with its creases and waves, or like a figure underneath veils of sand, a warm sand, and I spread it aside reaching downward but there was no limit, and then reaching up, but there was no limit there, and moving both my hands out to one side and then to the other, she was emerging once more, slowly as before, but did I ever find her amid the drifting sand? And yet now I was doing so, I knew, and I pushed upward past the creases and veils, parting them, and she opened her mouth, at first silent, and then just faintly heard, as though speaking.

Within every mouth there is a tongue, which can speak words. But it is also a flame, sometimes speaking silent words. In the darkness of a room there is a flame flickering silently. In the darkness of a room there are two flames flickering. In the darkness of a room, in the darkness of the soul, there are two flames flickering, speaking silently, on and on, forever.

It was a somewhat overcast morning. There must have been rain during the night. It was still almost dark. Purple clouds were painted across the horizon, a bright chip of orange sun showing. I waved down a cab and was driven back to my apartment.

CHAPTER 31

We were sitting on the balcony of my new place. I had moved back from Taipei and I had finally finished arranging things in the apartment. D. had been helping me, and now in the evening we were having tea on the porch-like balcony, looking out four stories down onto the small residential street. There were rows of houses opposite with the same rectangular silver railed balconies, there were families sitting out in the evening, some older couples, candles flickered on tables, a few children played at the edge of the road. A pink balloon floated near, touched down lightly and drifted to the doorstep. It was a red metal door with a couple of characters on paper pasted to it. In the dimming light I couldn't make them out. Then it opened and an old lady emerged and gathered the two children in. There was a candle on the circular metal table that had come with the place. The candle had plastic tulip petals grasping a clear crystal bell inverted; within, a flame was steady and fluid. D. had made tea in the brown tea pot that she liked to use – she had bought it for me – and she poured out the clear warm liquid into the small blue and white cups. She sat back in her seat. I had inherited with the place two rather fine wicker chairs.

“It’s good you come back. Too much trouble you know back and forth all the time.”

“Yes.”

“I told you before, you should listen.” She tilted her head to the side to emphasize. She had on a dark blue turtleneck and black pants. She sipped her tea and then placed the cup carefully back on the top of the round metal tabletop. Then she looked off toward the street. She seemed to be thinking of something.

“Yes, I know,” I said. A dog had sauntered in from the larger road that went past the street a block away and sat down in the middle of the road idly looking about. There was a peach-colored lantern at the street corner. It was a dark brown dog of some kind. The street was the color of pencil lead.

“Did you like the *chow fen* I made?” she said.

“Yes, it was really good. You took too much trouble.”

“No trouble.” We both took further sips of tea. “I think you are still sad about
something. Worried maybe.”

“I’m fine.”

“No,” she said, contradicting. Then after a moment, “She is I think, very important person, in many ways.” She set all five fingers down and gave a little pressure. “I think,” she added. “You know?”

I was a bit surprised she knew about these things, but I put this thought from my mind.

“We need people like her. So people can know important stories. Otherwise, no one knows.”

“Yes, that’s true.”

“Do you want more tea?”

“No I’m going to bed soon.”

“Yes, ok.”

We sat there for a few minutes. It was completely dark by now. Then she got up, adjusted her clothes a moment, straightening, and began taking the tea things away. When she was done she came back and stood by her chair. “I think I go now,” she said.

“Ok,” I said and got up to let her out. It was smaller place than the one I’d had before.

“I talk to you later,” she said and gave her customary little bow as she went out.

I went back to the balcony and stood there for a moment, looking at the night. It was the summer now. The night was warm. In the air the whole beauty of the island seemed to be present in its essence, something deep, resonant, filled with so many notes and suggestions – air and earth and sky and sea, a redolent stillness, somehow burgeoning. There was a bright half-moon, only a few clouds.

A few days later I was on my way into Taipei. Outside the bus window the landscape skimmed past – the fields of rice and beans and peas, yams and peanuts, the fruit orchards, the carpets of dense wood thrown about the broad shoulders of the fields, the Buddhist shrines here and there, the farmhouses of stone. The clouds were massing in the pale blue sky, the day was very bright and hot. But I was on the bus, in the air-conditioned dim. There are barriers, distances. Everyone knows this, and the efforts they call forth. But they might not always be able to be crossed – the distances. Still, there is the reaching out. That is the important thing. What should it be called? Some might say that it should be called love. As we came into the city there was the bridge, the skyline of the brilliant city, the famous temple and the main station and the crowded subway. Before long Dr. Yang was asking me in his friendly sly way if I had been drinking, and this time I could honestly say no, and once again he observed that I was two men, as his nurse smiled benignly. But I knew that he was wrong. I was really only one. I would be going back to the United States before long. In the meantime, I

had to learn more, to understand more. When I got back to the U.S. I didn't know what would happen, but I knew that I couldn't stay. I had been in flight from the United States, as one of my students had observed, but soon I would return to confront it. As far as the machinations of Dr. Gretchen were concerned, I was not worried. Others would take care of it. It was late summer now. The typhoons would be coming soon. I remembered the photos I had seen of her – standing amidst a half circle of farmers at their protest with her microphone held out to them, or Mei-Hwa with some girl friends at a reception, or another of her at a library table, books fanned out before her, her shy glance at the camera, partly turned away, or Mei-Hwa as a toddler sitting on the floor, seemingly by herself. She is reaching for something not visible in the frame. What could it have been? As the bus passed the famous temple on the way out of town, I thought of all the gods in all the different temples – gods of compassion, gods of mercy, gods of good fortune one would always hope, and then some strange and fiery gods – and I knew that they were watching over her, and I knew that they were smiling.